



LifeStone

AMPLIFY CHRIST

VOLUME 2

Love of the Father

The Father sends the Son

Love of the Son

The Son seeks and saves the lost

Love of the Early Believers

The early believers meet one another's needs



Love Displayed



AMPLIFY CHRIST

VOLUME 2

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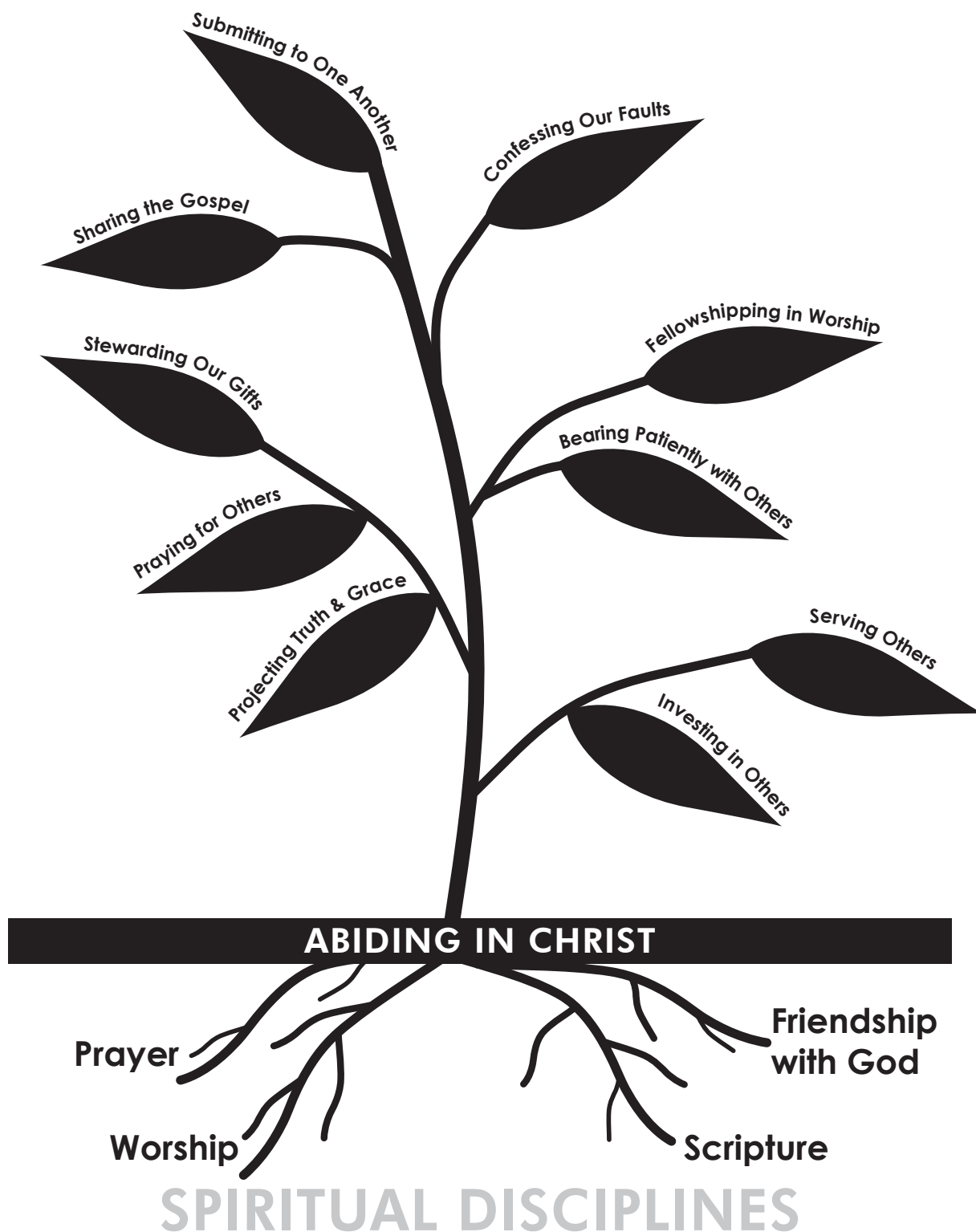
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OUR MISSION

LifeStone exists to empower **DISCIPLES** to make **DISCIPLES**. We seek to fulfill our mission by publishing Bible study and **DISCIPLESHIP** curriculum as well as offering real-life application training. We equip **DISCIPLES** as they journey through the various stages of life. As **DISCIPLES** grow in Christ, we continue to partner with them and their churches through training and other resources to empower **DISCIPLES** to make **DISCIPLES**.

DISCIPLE MAKING



FROM OUR PRESIDENT AND EDITOR IN CHIEF

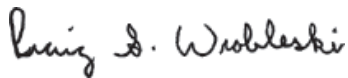
Dear Almighty Father,

Thank You for Your unconditional grace and mercy bestowed on LifeStone Ministries for 120 years. We are humbled by Your Son, the Master-Servant, who became the Living Stone rejected by men. You love us and build us up to be spiritual storehouses. We pray for Your strength and courage to be the living stones in our culture. We pray for perseverance to sacrifice ourselves to live wholly in subjection to Jesus Christ. May we glorify You in all our words and deeds as we strive to grow Your flock to spiritual maturity. We pray for the filling of the Holy Spirit as we engage Your flock.

Lord, we pray that this exposition of Your Word meets 2 Timothy 3:16. May the lessons contained in this labor of love emulate profitable teaching, graceful correction, and righteous training. We pray for all those who will be receiving instruction from these lessons. We pray for the teachers to approach this inspirational work with humility and meekness. May Your holy character and love for us leap from the pages and bring us all to our knees in thanksgiving.

Our glorious King, may we build the confidence and convictions of Christian leaders in our homes, churches, and missional fields to fulfill the Great Commission. Let us be renewed with strength and peace to empower Christian disciples to make disciples.

Under truth and grace,



Craig S. Wroblewski, M. Div., D. Min.
President & CEO
LifeStone Ministries

Dear Christ follower,

Our mission at LifeStone Ministries is to empower Christians to make disciples. We desire to partner with churches in this discipleship process. We have created a discipleship tool to help churches fulfill their calling. This new publication—*Amplify Christ*, as we call it—features a simple yet comprehensive five-step Bible study method that focuses on robust Bible learning and biblical application in a world that is often hostile to Christ's teaching.

Amplify Christ is not just another Bible curriculum. Discipleship requires a significant level of commitment from both teacher and student. Our discipleship tool likewise requires serious commitment. Leaders will need to inspire a group of people—maybe as few as one or two—to commit to spiritual formation and discipleship by investing their time and being willing to share their successes and failures. Group members can expect to read the lesson each week for an hour. Above all, group members will need to be honest with and encourage one another every week.

We have published this new discipleship tool and now prayerfully entrust it to you. We pray with all our hearts that the Holy Spirit will use it mightily to transform your lives and the lives of your group members, churches, and communities.

Sincerely,



James M. Leonard, Ph.D.
Editor in Chief
LifeStone Ministries

HOW TO USE AMPLIFY CHRIST

Christian discipleship is a matter of following the Master's footprints. The first disciples did just that—they followed Jesus from place to place, shared the same meals, slept at the same campsites, celebrated the same special occasions, and met the same people. In all these experiences, Jesus taught them verbally and through His actions. The disciples saw Jesus react to different people in different situations. They examined His work habits, observed His demeanor, and scrutinized how He practiced what He preached.

Even though we moderns can't follow Jesus physically, we are nonetheless called to be like Him in word and deed, conformed to His image. This is our calling, and we dare not ignore it. The only way we can know how to follow in Jesus' footprints is to learn about Him in the Bible. In the New Testament, eyewitnesses and other early disciples detail Jesus' life, ministry, and teaching. Similarly, the Old Testament helps us understand God's intentions for us through stories, worship materials, prophetic messages, and the Mosaic Law. God has given us His precious Scriptures to know how we should live. For this reason, disciples should have an intense thirst and hunger for God's Word.

Modern-day disciples, however, sometimes get discouraged about reading the Bible because of its antiquity and foreign culture. Sometimes they get so enthralled by the Bible's antiquity and alien culture that they fail to apply its teaching. Modern-day disciples may segment a familiar verse from its context and fail to understand its intended meaning, and sometimes they fail to integrate Scripture into theology.

For all these reasons, our new discipleship tool emphasizes five key elements for Scripture study. We hope *Amplify Christ* helps you become more like Christ.

THE METHOD

FIVE KEY ELEMENTS

- 1. Amplify the Background.** Because the Bible was written long ago in a culture different from ours, we investigate rigorously to bridge the gap separating us moderns from the biblical writers. We present to our readers those backgrounds that help them understand the biblical passage.
- 2. Amplify the Text.** One of the legacy features of our publications is the exposition of the text. We focus on the original author's intended message to his original audience, addressing the question, What was the author conveying to them back then? We hone in on the verse-by-verse details to explain the passage's big picture.
- 3. Amplify the Context.** Many Christians see Scripture as piecemeal. We want disciples to see how individual stories and texts are connected to the whole biblical story. We read the text as sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within a larger text unit. This is basic exegesis. But our readers should also understand how the entirety of a book fits into the whole of Scripture and the larger biblical history. We write to show how each text interconnects to form a majestic and awe-inspiring picture of God's plan.
- 4. Amplify the Faith.** Christians need to allow Scripture to inform their thinking and basic Christian doctrine. We believe that God inspired His Word and that we should accept it as the rule of our lives as we seek to follow the Spirit's guidance. To this end, we spell out how the biblical text informs Bible doctrines and how we should think.
- 5. Amplify Your Life.** Our goal is not to create a bunch of smart, brainiac Christians. Yes, we want Christians to be competent readers of the Bible, but this is not enough. We do everything we can to help disciples apply the text to their lives so that they grow in Christ's likeness. We think deeply about the text, explicitly seeking ways to articulate the principles of the ancient text to us today and to the specific individual. We are most urgent about the Christian formation of Christ followers.

TIMELINE

Unknown	Adam and Eve
Unknown	Noah
Unknown	Tower of Babel
2166-1991 B.C.	Life of Abraham
1916-1806 B.C.	Life of Joseph
1876-1446 B.C.	Israelites in Egypt
1446 B.C.	Exodus
1446 B.C.	Law at Sinai
1446-1406 B.C.	Wilderness wandering
1406-1399 B.C.	Joshua leads the conquest
1360-1075 B.C.	Judges Period
1051-931 B.C.	United monarchy
1011-971 B.C.	David reigns
959 B.C.	Solomon builds the temple
931-586 B.C.	Divided monarchy
722 B.C.	Assyria conquers Israel
605 B.C.	Babylon conquers Assyria
586 B.C.	Babylon conquers Judah/temple destroyed
539 B.C.	Persia conquers Babylon
538 B.C.	Exiles return to Judah
515 B.C.	Temple rebuilt
458 B.C.	Ezra returns to Israel from Babylon
445 B.C.	Nehemiah rebuilds the wall
331 B.C.	Greece conquers Persia
175-164 B.C.	Seleucid rule over Israel by Antiochus IV Epiphanes
63 B.C.	Rome captures Jerusalem
7 to 4 B.C.	Birth of Jesus
A.D. 26-30	Jesus' ministry
A.D. 30	Jesus' death and resurrection
A.D. 45-56	Paul's missionary journeys
A.D. 70	Rome destroys the temple

IMPORTANT DATES

Comfort for the Exiles

Written by Andrew Rudolf

READ AND TAKE NOTE

Read Isaiah 40:1-5, 25-26, 29-31. Look for:

- shifts in the chapter's speaker
- opening words of encouragement (vss. 1-2)
- the preparation for God's return to Jerusalem (vss. 3-5)
- God's unrivaled greatness (vss. 25-26)
- God's provision of strength to a weary people (vss. 29-31)

FIND IT

Ecclesiastes
Song of Songs
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations

Who: God
Jerusalem
a proclaiming voice
others

What: a message of comfort and encouragement for those returning from exile

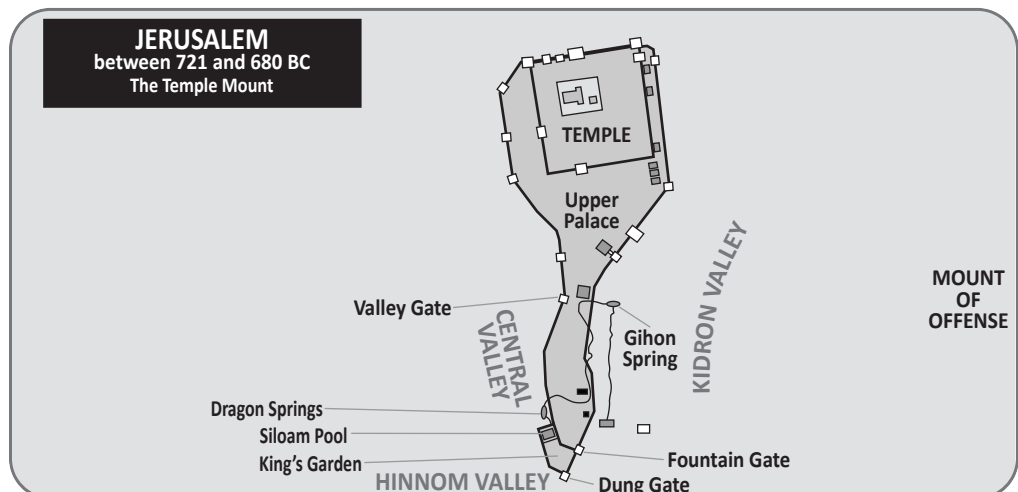
When: between 721 and 680 B.C.

Where: Kingdom of Judah

Why: to comfort God's people with the assurance of His unending love and strength

How: with a new message for Jerusalem

Spiritual Formation: Disciples should live expectantly for Christ, trusting in Him for comfort and endurance.





AMPLIFY THE BACKGROUND

THOUGHTS

Read Psalm 137 and consider the pain of Babylonian Exile.

The words of Psalm 137 are not easily forgotten. The lament of the psalmist resounds through all nine verses of the poem, recalling the pain reflected in Lamentations, Ezekiel, and other books composed during the Babylonian Exile. In this psalm of lament, the exiled Jews sat by the rivers of an oppressive empire, setting aside their musical instruments and promising never to forget Jerusalem, the city they loved. As they faced the brutality of a ruthless empire, many wondered, *Has God abandoned us?*

Yet beyond the seventy years of exile that lay before them, God's words of comfort remained. God was not done with His people; He would bring them out of the exile into which they had descended. The hope of life after exile fills the pages of Isaiah's later chapters. While much of chapters 1 through 39 speak harsh and grim warnings, chapter 40 introduces a new section of the prophet's work. Here Isaiah no longer warned his people of the coming exile but spoke past it, offering comfort to the future audience in Babylonian Exile. The twice repeated imperative opens chapter 40: "Comfort, comfort."

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The verses that follow function as a prelude to the coming chapters. The affirmations of God's love for His people in Isaiah 40 are not detached from the people's painful memories but address them. Dismissing Babylon's false view of divinity and the cosmos, God declared Himself the only Creator and Sustainer. In place of the Babylonian polytheism and astrology his audience knew all too well, Isaiah found only one God: Yahweh.

Babylonian religion, like most of the ancient Near Eastern religions, revolved around a pantheon of finite deities. These gods were often assigned a particular natural phenomenon—such as the wind or sea—and operated within geographic and cultural boundaries. They were vindictive and fickle, demanding human attention and acting violently when slighted. Chief of the Babylonian gods was Marduk, the storm god hailed for defeating the chaotic sea monster Tiamat, whose corpse he used to create the cosmos. According to Babylonian myths, the gods appointed Marduk as king of the gods and granted him authority over the stars and constellations. In Babylonian religion, the stars were intimately linked with the gods and were considered divine manifestations.

In light of their mythic understanding of the stars, the Babylonians (and much of Mesopotamia) believed that the constellations conveyed the fates of humanity. Sages named the stars and tracked their movements in an effort to interpret the future. They trusted that the stars over which Marduk exercised kingship would reveal their fate.

Deuteronomy 4:19 warns against this practice. God commanded His people to resist worshipping the stars. Israel was to praise the true God, who brought them out of Egypt. Yet Israel and Judah still adopted astrological practices similar to Babylon's. In 2 Kings 17, the historian recounted the many sins and idolatries that Israel embraced instead of God. Among these, verse 16 includes worshipping the host of heaven. Under the reign of King Manasseh, Judah likewise worshipped the stars (21:1-5). Ironically, Judah's adoption of astrology is one of the reasons they entered exile under Babylonia—the empire that revered the stars!

The remaining chapters of Isaiah, however, look past the illusion. In chapter 47, God proclaimed the humiliation of Babylon, criticizing the empire that would soon crumble. Astrologers, who scan the night sky for answers, are mocked in verses 13-14. They are helpless and like straw consumed by fire. God alone created and named the stars; He alone knows humanity's future.

There is no one like Him.

AMPLIFY THE TEXT

THOUGHTS

Check out Psalm 147—one of the final “hallelujah Psalms.” Verses 2-6 echo the lesson's passages from Isaiah 40.

Isaiah 40, the prelude to the remaining twenty-six chapters of the book, is a chorus of many voices. Before attending to the lesson's verses in detail, let's briefly observe the shifting speakers. The identities of the speakers and audi-

ence and their apparent anonymity at times shape how we understand the text. When a speaker or audience is not clear, we should focus elsewhere and not on who it may be. Isaiah's decision to leave these individuals anonymous indicates that we should focus on the message and speakers he did identify.

The first two verses open with God's message to an unknown audience concerning the comfort and restoration of Jerusalem. Verses 3-5 again speak to an unknown audience, though its speaker shifts. One of God's messengers, perhaps a prophet, spoke on behalf of the Lord (cf. vs. 5). Once more, God directly spoke in verses 25-26. Finally, an anonymous speaker concluded chapter 40 in the final verses.

GOD SPOKE (Isaiah 40:1-2)

Although the previous thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah offer brief glimpses of hope (cf. 2:1-5; 9:1-7; etc.), the prophet mostly pronounced dire warnings and condemnations. The people had fallen away from their God and would face the consequences. The exile would come, and the people would endure their punishment. Yet a time would follow when God would once again embrace His people and restore Jerusalem. Isaiah no longer spoke to the people descending into exile but to those whom God would raise out of it.

Isaiah 40:1 inaugurates God's message for those returning from exile with a twice repeated command: "Comfort, comfort my people." Those God calls to comfort His people are unknown. The lack of a defined audience suggests that anyone who hears God's words ought to participate in the effort to comfort His people. The message to God's people is unquestionable.

Underlying the verse is a message of God's faithfulness to His covenant. In His covenants with Abraham and Moses, God promised that Israel would be His people and He would be their God (Genesis 17:7-8; Exodus 6:7). As Israel ignored God's instructions and abandoned Him for idolatry, God announced that they had been unfaithful, comparing them to an adulterous spouse. In Hosea 1:9, He proclaimed that they were no longer His people and He was no longer their God. It seemed God had abandoned His sinful people in exile. Yet His faithfulness endured. In His words of comfort for those returning from exile, God spoke comfort to *His* people as *their* God. His covenantal love remained.

Continuing, God commanded His audience to speak tenderly to Jerusalem, the holy city. As in several places throughout the Old Testament, Isaiah 40:2 personifies Jerusalem as a woman (cf. 2 Kings 19:21; Lamentations 1:1-2). The exiled Jews would return to and rebuild her.

The message for Jerusalem is threefold: she had fulfilled her forced service, her iniquity had been carried away, and she had received double from God according to her sins. The first two statements are clear. The exiled city had endured its punishment, and God removed its iniquity. The third, however, has been a point of confusion for many. At first glance, it seems unfair that God gave Jerusalem twofold for its sins. Would not an equal share be enough?

Despite what a cursory reading might suggest, the double portion is not an expression of detached judgment. In the Bible and throughout the ancient Near East, the multiplication of one's punishment was commonplace. Exodus 22:7 says that the Mosaic Law stipulated that a thief must pay his victim back *double*. Hammurabi's Code, a legal text from the eighteenth century B.C., demanded a thief return stolen property from a king or a god *thirtyfold* and stolen property from a poor man *tenfold*. The prayers of a Hittite king begged his gods to end a long-lasting plague that had already afflicted his city *twentyfold* for its sins.

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One was expected to pay multiples for one's crime. Otherwise, nothing would dissuade the criminal from committing it again. If getting caught in theft simply meant returning the stolen goods, why stop? Modern legal systems function similarly. The penalty for stealing a vehicle is more than just returning the car!

Thus, God's proclamation of a double portion for Jerusalem's sins is defined by His compassion. By both ancient and modern standards, the sinful city should have paid much more. But God is merciful. Speaking on the other side of exile, God offered words of comfort to His beloved city. The time for punishment was over, and restoration was beginning.

AN UNKNOWN VOICE (Isaiah 40:3-5)

Verses 3-5 are some of the best-known verses of Isaiah, perhaps rivaled only by the Christmas promises in Isaiah 7 and 9 and the description of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. Centuries later, John the Baptist would step into these verses, announcing the coming of God's Messiah, Jesus (Matthew 3:3). Yet in its original context, the voice remained anonymous. This indicates that we should center our attention on the message, not the messenger.

The announcement realizes God's message in Isaiah 40:1-2. The words of comfort take a concrete form in the shape of a construction project. The new voice implored its audience to prepare the wilderness for the Lord's coming. Verse 3 commissions the work, verse 4 details the means of construction, and verse 5 provides the reason for it. These verses offer the "what," "how," and "why," respectively.

The Commission to Construct (Isaiah 40:3). After God spoke comfort to His beloved city, verse 3 explains how God would offer consolation to those returning from exile; He would come to His people. In antiquity, cities and local governments were responsible for preparing roads for a dignitary's arrival. It is only fitting, then, that Jerusalem should prepare a road for its King.

God's arrival recalls previous moments in Israel's history. After David conquered Jerusalem, he ushered the ark of the covenant into it (2 Samuel 6). As the Lord entered the holy city, the king and his people celebrated with dancing and music (vs. 5). Psalm 24 captures God's entrance into the temple. The psalmist calls out to the temple's gates and doors, commanding them to open before the coming King (vss. 7-10). The Lord's arrival demands full preparation and celebration.

It is appropriate that the arrival of such an important figure would necessitate an unparalleled construction project. The wilderness was an unforgiving ecosystem that was not easily traversed. On their journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, the returning Jews followed the Euphrates River north to Aleppo or Tadmor and then south along the Mediterranean Sea to Jerusalem. A straight path through the desert was nearly impossible. Yet through this harsh climate, God would come!

Unlike roads today, ancient Near Eastern paths were not paved. To produce a road stable enough for wagons to traverse, ancients would level a route and lay stone on it. These highways required constant maintenance by local authorities. Building a road on flat, stable land was a laborious task—imagine building a highway through the rugged wilderness!

The building of highways after the exile is a repeated theme in Isaiah. Chapter 11 anticipates the coming of Jesse's Root, who will assemble dispersed Judah and Israel and end their oppression (vss. 12-13). The prophet recalls the Exodus, declaring that just as God made a path through the sea out of Egypt, He will prepare a highway for His people out of exile (vs. 16).

The imagery of road construction fits with the greater theme of Isaiah 40 through 66: the restoration of God's people. Roads were instrumental in the establish-

ment of an empire. They were necessary for military transportation, commerce, and communication. Little could happen without them. Thus, the promise of restoration warrants the construction of roads. And upon the wilderness road comes God.

The Means of Construction (Isaiah 40:4). Following the commission of the wilderness highway for God's arrival, the voice described how the road would be built. The process was nothing short of total ecological transformation. Terrain would shift dramatically to yield a level road for the coming King.

In poetic fashion, Isaiah 40 captures the changes in two sets of parallel lines. The first set offers contrasting imagery: valleys made high, and mountains and hills made low. The difficult terrain would be leveled. Every obstacle to God's arrival would be removed as the wilderness became straight. The second set is synonymous, building on the same imagery. The rugged ground would be leveled, and the ridges would become like plains. The challenging features of the wilderness would be flattened. In preparation for the King, the wilderness would be molded for His highway.

The extent of the ecological transformation goes even further in Isaiah 51:3. Once more, the prophet captured the Lord comforting His ruined city. In between the assurances of comfort and the promise of joy and worship in the city, Isaiah described the transformation of the wilderness and desert—the same ecological terms in Isaiah 40:3. The wilderness would become like Eden and the desert like the garden of the Lord. This was no typical construction process. Immense change would occur in preparation for God's coming.

The Reason for Construction (Isaiah 40:5). After the proclamation, the voice offered the reason for the preparation: God would reveal His glory. Throughout the Old Testament—especially in Exodus—God's glory is the manifestation of His presence. In Exodus 33, Moses requested to see God's glory (vs. 18). In response, God commanded Moses to stand in the cleft of a rock as He passed by, allowing him only to see God's back (vss. 20-23). In contrast to this individual experience, all flesh would see God's glory as He came to Jerusalem. Much like the expansive geographic scope of Isaiah 40:4, verse 5 expands God's audience; everyone would see His presence.

2 Kings 17 recounts the Northern Kingdom's continued descent into sin under King Hoshea. Verse 23 explains the consequences. God turned His face from them, and they entered exile. The depiction of God turning His face away is common in descriptions of the exile. Much earlier, Moses warned that God would turn His face from Israel when they would break the covenant and worship foreign gods (Deuteronomy 31:16-18). Because of Israel's sin, God would turn His presence away from them.

Ezekiel, a prophet who experienced the beginning of the Babylonian Exile, witnessed this firsthand. He saw the glory of God rising out of the temple and departing (Ezekiel 10). In a grand reversal of God's departure from Jerusalem, Isaiah 40:5 celebrates the return of God's glory. He would be seen by all. Despite the sins of the people, God would bring restoration.

THOUGHTS

Read Isaiah 40:21-24 to better understand the context!

GOD SPOKE AGAIN (Isaiah 40:25-26)

In verses 25-26, God again spoke. In this short unit of verses, God asked a series of questions and offered an answer by prompting the readers to consider the vast night sky.

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In contrast to the idolatrous polytheism that defined religion in Babylon, God declared Himself the sole deity and Creator. Rhetorically, God asked who is comparable to Him. The answer is clear: no one. As verse 25 expresses, the Lord is the Holy One. This title is reserved for Him alone, stressing God's awesomeness in sharp, uncompromising contrast with everything else. There is one God, and nothing is close in comparison. He is the Creator; everything else is the created.

Verse 26 calls the readers to look up at the night sky. God alone created it. Recall the Babylonian understanding of the stars and constellations. Babylonia's sages often deified the stars and planets, giving them names and tracking their movements for information on the future. They believed Marduk earned kingship over them by engaging in a violent battle.

This religious model, however, could not be further from the truth. God created the stars. God organized and named them. They are not quasi-divine entities imparting knowledge but subordinate aspects of God's creation. His authority over the stars is not a prize for defeating contesting gods and chaotic monsters. He spoke, and they came into being (Genesis 1:16). As God proclaimed to Job, He alone rules the constellations and knows their movements (Job 38:31-33). The Babylonians could not ascertain humanity's fate from the night sky. God alone knows what is in store. He alone reigns over the cosmos.

A NEW SPEAKER (Isaiah 40:29-31)

Verses 29-31 are the well-known conclusion to chapter 40, bringing the prelude of Isaiah's new section to a close. This passage relies on the same Hebrew poetry style explored above, consisting of four sets of synonymous parallel lines. These sets, in turn, function in similar ways as larger units. Verse 29 contrasts with verse 30, and verse 31 contains two synonymous sets. The purpose behind the poetic ending is clear. True strength and endurance are from the Lord. Even the world's best will fail, but those who trust in God will not.

Unlike the young and strong, who eventually lose their strength, God empowers those who wait on Him. Today we often associate "waiting" with a line at the grocery store or the stoplights on our drives. It is a passive, indifferent passing of time. Verse 31 does not prompt its readers to approach God in this manner.

Rather, waiting on the Lord is active and intentional. It is living expectantly for God and His coming kingdom. Hope in God is built on trust and assurance, and it should compel Christians to live in ways that reflect that. God promised those returning from exile that He would come to Jerusalem and reveal Himself. When Jesus triumphantly entered the holy city, He did just that. Now we wait for His second coming, living each day with expectant, purposeful hope that He will reveal Himself to all flesh and set all things right.

AMPLIFY THE CONTEXT

PLACE IN THE BIBLE

Isaiah 40 offers hope to the exiled people as they return to Jerusalem. Although the future was promising for those departing Babylon, it would present many obstacles. As Ezra and Nehemiah record, the Jews faced opposition from the surrounding nations as they rebuilt the temple and Jerusalem's walls.

Persia, the empire that permitted the Jews' return, eventually fell to Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic period. His death ushered in a time of political instability and harsh leaders. Chief among these was Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who defiled the temple with idols and forbidden sacrifices. In response, the Jews rose up in the Maccabean Revolt, but their political freedom was short. Soon Rome dominated, imposing a firm political and economic presence upon Jerusalem and Judea. The Babylonian Exile was about to end, but centuries of oppression still lay before them.

Yet through it all, God's words in Isaiah 40 never wavered. He would comfort His people and empower the weak. In the first century, John the Baptist would assume the voice recorded in verses 3-5 hundreds of years before—the Lord was coming. And indeed, He had come. Jesus, God incarnate, had arrived to set His people free.

PLACE IN THE STORY OF SALVATION

Even when reading texts that celebrate the return from exile like Isaiah 40, it is easy to question why God seemingly abandoned His people in punishment for seventy years. How could a merciful and compassionate God do that? Gladly, when we take a step back and look at the larger story, the answer becomes clearer.

The long history of idolatry and iniquity that preceded the exile is comparable to a boat on a river flowing toward a waterfall. The longer Israel sinned, the closer it came to the waterfall's precipice. For centuries, the nation could have heeded the warnings of God and His prophets to paddle to shore, but it chose to ignore the alerts. As it flowed nearer to the fall, the waters raged and picked up speed. Still, the nation failed to take notice. Eventually, the critical point came when the river's force grew too strong and no paddling could bring the boat to shore. Even if God's people repented, they would still go over the waterfall. They had simply waited too long (Fretheim, *Exodus, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Westminster John Knox, 101).

Still, God did not quit. His mercy and compassion did not end at the waterfall's precipice. He would be found on the other side of the fall. The pain experienced by those in exile was severe, but it did not mark the end of God's compassion. Rather, He would be waiting on the other side, preparing to speak to a people who had disobeyed and ignored Him for so long. When they would finally learn that death and darkness are all that exist apart from God, they would seek Him earnestly. Against God's warning, the Israelites chose the waterfall over safety. But that did not stop God. He would be there on the other side of the fall, waiting to embrace His people.

PLACE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Despite Isaiah 40's grand and poetic language, the prophet's image of God's arrival was far from symbolic. God would actually arrive; and in Jesus, He did. Matthew 3 introduces Jesus' ministry with John the Baptist. Embodying the prophetic voice, John announced Jesus' arrival: the kingdom of heaven was near (vss. 1-3). As Isaiah recorded, Jesus would offer comfort to His people and strengthen the weak. Yet He would do so in an unexpected way.

No highway was built for Jesus. Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem preceded His death. Yet through His crucifixion, Jesus offered the comfort God had

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long promised His people. He saved us from the exile of sin that persisted long after the departure from Babylon. As He departed death on the third day, so He will lead us out of death.

AMPLIFY THE FAITH

Isaiah 40 offers important theological insight into God's relationship with creation. From the handful of verses explored in the chapter, three driving doctrinal points are evident: God is the only deity, the distinction between God and the cosmos is uncompromising, and God alone has full knowledge and power.

In sharp contrast to the religious models adopted in Babylonia and the ancient Near East, God declares that He is the only God. The Bible does not present a pantheon of finite gods, battling one another and other foes for power and authority. God alone rules, and no other god exists (cf. 45:5). This is called *monotheism*, and it contrasts with many ancient and modern religions. Others believe in *polytheism*, that multiple gods exist; *deism*, that a supernatural being created the universe but does not engage with humanity; and *atheism*, that God does not exist. While each position has garnered supporters at various points in history, the Bible is clear that each is wrong.

Critics of the faith often argue that Christianity's doctrine of the Trinity contradicts its belief in monotheism. But this argument is not well founded. Christianity believes in three Persons but one God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not separate deities that are closely related. They are three in one. Although each Person is distinct from the other, all three are God. He is perfect unity.

Coupled with Isaiah 40's monotheism is the untraversable gap between God and creation. Many believe the line between divinity and the world is blurred. Today people ascribe divine attributes to the cosmos, certain creatures, and even themselves. Whether it is the horoscope in the newspaper or the claim that the universe is guiding a person's life, this notion persists in culture. Yet just as the Babylonians were wrong for thinking the stars offered divine insight, so are people today mistaken for believing anything besides God possesses divine abilities.

Finally, Isaiah 40 expresses that only God is omniscient and omnipotent. Omniscience, complete knowledge, is reserved for God alone. Only He knows all that has happened, is happening, and will happen. Whereas the Babylonians believed the stars could offer insight into the future and fate of humanity, only God knows such things. This is a source of hope and comfort. We are not desperate for the information offered by esoteric astrologers as they stare at the night sky. The One who created and loves us knows what will come our way, and He has promised to walk with us through it all. We may not know the future, but He does. We can place all our trust in Him.

Omnipotence is the possession of infinite power. As only God knows the future, so He alone has complete strength. As Isaiah 40 wonderfully displays, God's omnipotence is not cold or detached from His love and mercy. His power to create and name the stars ensures that not one is missing (vs. 26); each is of tremendous value to Him. Likewise, He does not yield His power and watch as others fail. To those who await Him—living expectantly for Him—He gives strength beyond what the young and strong possess. In God's omniscience and omnipotence, we find compassion and love.

AMPLIFY YOUR LIFE

NOTES

The final verses of Isaiah 40 are familiar words for many Christians. The uplifting conclusion to the chapter is found in the lyrics of worship songs and on T-shirts and mugs. The promise of strength when we are weak and endurance when we are tired is very attractive, especially in the difficult times of life. Unlike those who fit the world's definition of powerful, we receive strength just by waiting on the Lord. But what does this mean?

Waiting on God is not passively waiting for time to pass. It is living active, expectant lives for Him. We must reorient our entire lives around God. Everything we do should be in eager expectation for His moving Spirit. Every dimension of our lives ought to be surrendered to Him, prepared to respond or change at His prompting. God is ever-present in this world, healing wounds, restoring relationships, and replacing sorrow with joy. Our hope in God is not unfounded or misplaced. His presence in the world is tangible.

Yet at times, it seems that God's activity has ceased. Those who wait on the Lord may still lose their jobs without finding better ones, never enjoy the reconciliation of a broken relationship, and die of illnesses. How can we reconcile the painful realities of this world with the promises in verses 29-31? We need to look to the empty tomb.

When Jesus arrived at Jerusalem, He entered to die. The comfort Jesus provided God's people was not achieved through conquest. It was earned through His crucifixion. By atoning for our sins in death, Jesus rose to new life. He offers the same to us. The ultimate hope we live for is not found on this side of death. It is in the resurrection. As Hebrews 11:35-40 observes, those who suffered horrible things for Christ did not receive what was promised. Instead, God offers them something better: new life. As we consider Isaiah 40:29-31, let us remember that our hope in God looks beyond the temporary experiences of this life. Christians have already died with Christ, so we will also be united with Him in the resurrection (Romans 6:5).

Live expectantly for God, believing that He can do wonderful things now and knowing that He will make all things right in the end. Resurrection is coming.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Imagine your neighbor has long suffered a chronic illness. She keeps faith in the Lord and trusts that He will heal her. But as her illness progresses, she grows concerned that God has not healed her yet. She questions whether she somehow failed in her prayer life or devotion to God. What can you say to her to comfort her and support her faith in God? How can Isaiah 40 remind her that God has not abandoned her?

2. How might you respond to someone who relies on horoscopes or psychics to discern the future? What does Isaiah 40 say about that? What about the rest of Scripture?

3. In what ways does God give us strength? How have you experienced this in your own life or in the lives of those around you?

4. How should we look toward the future in light of Isaiah 40? How can we trust the Lord when we do not know what is to come?

5. How can we prepare for the Lord to come into our own lives? What areas of your life do you need to reorient toward Him?
