

Homiletics Analysis: Isaiah 40

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Isaiah 40 opens with one of the most dramatic pivots in all of Scripture. After thirty-nine chapters of covenant lawsuit, siege, and impending exile, God speaks comfort. The chapter begins with a double imperative — “Comfort, comfort my people” — and proceeds through a series of interlocking movements: the announcement of exile’s end and a highway through the wilderness (vv. 1–11), a series of rhetorical questions establishing the incomparability of God against all rivals (vv. 12–26), and a closing appeal to the exhausted and doubting exiles that the incomparable God renews the strength of those who wait on Him (vv. 27–31). The chapter is not a single argument so much as a cumulative theological assault on despair — each section answering a different objection the exiles might raise: Is God willing? (vv. 1–2). Is He able? (vv. 12–26). Does He notice us? (vv. 27–31). By the chapter’s end, the answer to all three is an overwhelming yes, and the only fitting response is to wait on the LORD.

This Text — Intent

God’s intent through Isaiah 40 is to shatter the theological despair of a people who have concluded — through the evidence of exile — that He is either unwilling or unable to act on their behalf. He is not merely communicating truths about His character; He is performing surgery on broken faith. The rhetorical questions (“Who has measured the waters?” “To whom will you liken God?”) are not designed to inform but to overwhelm — to make the smallness of every idol and every rival king feel absurd by comparison. The closing section (vv. 27–31) reveals the pastoral urgency beneath the doxology: God is speaking to people who have said, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God.” He intends to produce renewed trust — not merely revised theology — in people who have stopped believing He is paying attention.

Subject Sentence: The incomparable LORD speaks sovereign comfort to His exhausted, despairing people.

Primary Claim: God is confronting the despair of His people not with circumstances changed but with His own incomparable character revealed — calling them to discover that waiting on the LORD is not a counsel of resignation but the only path to renewed strength.

Interpretive Evaluation

The authorship question and its homiletical stakes

Critical scholarship has long argued for a “Deutero-Isaiah” beginning at chapter 40 — a second author writing from within the exile rather than the eighth-century Isaiah ben Amoz writing prospectively. This is not a peripheral academic debate; it directly affects interpretation. If chapters 40–55 are post-exilic composition, the passage reads as contemporaneous pastoral address to present sufferers. If Isaiah of Jerusalem wrote prospectively, the passage is explicitly predictive prophecy — God speaking comfort *before* the exile falls, which constitutes its own claim about divine foreknowledge and sovereign control. The Reformed reading — consistent with the New Testament’s uniform attribution of the whole book to Isaiah (cf. John 12:38–41, citing both “halves” as from a single prophet) — takes the text as eighth-century prophecy. This is not only historically defensible; it actually sharpens the theology. God is not reacting to exile; He is preparing His people for it, which means the comfort of chapter 40 is announced *before* the suffering arrives. The God who can speak comfort prospectively across a 150-year gap has demonstrated precisely the sovereignty the chapter claims.

The “herald” of verses 3–5 — wilderness geography or eschatological promise?

Dispensational and some Jewish readings have interpreted the “voice in the wilderness” (v. 3) as pointing primarily to a literal future highway in the land of Israel. The Reformed reading, confirmed by all four evangelists (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4–6; John 1:23), identifies this as fulfilled in John the Baptist’s ministry — a fulfillment that does not require physical highway construction but the spiritual preparation of Israel’s heart for the LORD’s advent in the person of Christ. This reading does not deny the passage’s exilic resonances; it sees John the Baptist’s ministry as recapitulating the exodus-homecoming typology at a deeper level, bringing not exiles home to Jerusalem but sinners home to God. The dispensational insistence on a strictly literal and future fulfillment fails to account for the evangelists’ explicit and unanimous citation.

The “Servant” anticipation and chapter 40’s relationship to chapters 42–53

Some interpreters read Isaiah 40 as a self-contained chapter with no forward reference. The Reformed canonical reading recognizes that Isaiah 40 functions as the theological overture to the entire second half of Isaiah — establishing the incomparability of the LORD precisely so that the Servant Songs (chapters 42, 49, 50, 52–53) can be heard correctly. The Servant who takes the exile of sin upon Himself is none other than the LORD who here declares He is incomparable. The comfort announced in 40:1–2 is not ultimately delivered by a Cyrus-decree (though that is the immediate instrument) but by the Servant who bears iniquity. Preaching chapter 40 without at least nodding toward this forward trajectory flattens the chapter’s full redemptive-historical force.

Wesleyan/Arminian reading of “those who wait”

Some in the Wesleyan tradition have read verses 27–31 as a straightforward conditional: those who wait on the LORD receive strength; those who do not, do not — with the “waiting” understood as a human moral achievement that activates divine blessing. The Reformed reading resists this framing. The waiting is not a meritorious condition but a posture produced by the very proclamation that precedes it — the incomparable God, through His own word, creates the faith-rest that then receives His strength. The chapter does not present waiting as a spiritual technique; it presents it as the only sane response to the God just described.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 14–15** — The original exodus establishes the pattern: Israel in impossible circumstances, God acting in sovereign power, the people called to “stand firm and see the salvation of the LORD.” Isaiah 40 reopens this file, invoking a new exodus through the wilderness. The God who parted the Red Sea is the same God now promising to carry His exiles home.
 - **Psalms 46** — “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble... Be still and know that I am God.” The same call to rest in God’s incomparable power when circumstances are overwhelming — the Psalmic antecedent to Isaiah 40’s final summons.
 - **Romans 8:31–39** — Paul’s doxology on the incomparability of God’s love echoes the rhetorical structure of Isaiah 40: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” mirrors “To whom will you liken God?” Both texts move from divine incomparability to pastoral assurance; Paul’s answers in Romans 8 are the New Testament’s full unpacking of the comfort announced in Isaiah 40.
 - **John 1:23 / Luke 3:4–6** — The Evangelists’ citation of Isaiah 40:3–5 as fulfilled in John the Baptist provides the New Testament hermeneutical key for the passage’s fulfillment: the comfort of Isaiah 40 arrives in the person of Jesus Christ, the “glory of the LORD” revealed in the flesh.
 - **Revelation 21:4** — “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.” The ultimate resolution of the despair Isaiah 40 addresses — the comfort that was announced in chapter 40, inaugurated in Christ’s first advent, consummated in His return. Isaiah 40 is the overture; Revelation 21 is the final chord.
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Aim: To demonstrate that the incomparable God of Isaiah 40 is not a theological abstraction but the living anchor for every exhausted, doubting believer — and that waiting

on Him is neither passive resignation nor heroic virtue but the Spirit-produced response of those who have seen who He actually is.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	The double imperative: “Comfort, comfort my people” — God commands His messengers to announce that Jerusalem’s warfare is ended, her iniquity pardoned, double punishment received	The opening “Comfort” is addressed to unnamed heralds (plural imperative), not to Israel; God is commissioning messengers before the address to Israel begins. “Double” for her sins — intensification, not arithmetic calculation
3–5	A voice commands: “Prepare the way of the LORD in the wilderness” — a highway for God through the desert; the glory of the LORD will be revealed and all flesh shall see it	New Exodus imagery: the return from exile as a second wilderness march, with God Himself leading; cited by all four Evangelists as fulfilled in John the Baptist
6–8	A second voice commands: “Cry!” — the herald asks what to cry; the answer: all flesh is grass, all its glory like the flower of the field; the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever	Human frailty set against divine permanence; this contrast is the theological preparation for the incomparability section ahead; cited by Peter in 1 Peter 1:24–25
9–11	Zion/Jerusalem is told to be a herald of good news: “Behold your God!” God comes as a mighty warrior AND as a shepherd — carrying lambs in His arms	The two images of God (warrior and shepherd) are held in tension: He is powerful enough to conquer AND tender enough to carry. Neither exhausts Him
12–17	Rhetorical questions begin: Who has measured the waters? Who has marked off the heavens? Who has weighed mountains? The	First incomparability movement: incomparability via creation. The scale of the cosmos is the scale of His ordinary activity

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	nations are like a drop in the bucket, like dust on the scales — less than nothing before Him	
18–20	“To whom then will you liken God?” — the idol-maker’s absurdity: cutting down a tree, using half for fuel, making the other half into a god, overlaying it with gold	Second incomparability movement: incomparability via contrast with idols. The idol cannot act; the LORD acts across history
21–24	“Do you not know? Do you not hear?” — God sits above the circle of the earth; rulers and princes are like grass; He brings them to nothing	Third incomparability movement: incomparability via sovereignty over human power; the repeated rhetorical questions drive toward accountability — they have been told this
25–26	“To whom then will you compare me?” — Lift up your eyes and see: He who created the stars calls them each by name; by the greatness of His might, not one is missing	Fourth incomparability movement: incomparability via the stars — the ancient world’s most awe-inspiring display. The LORD knows every star by name; none escapes His attention
27–28	“Why do you say, O Jacob, ‘My way is hidden from the LORD’?” — Rhetorical confrontation of Israel’s complaint; the everlasting God does not faint or grow weary; His understanding is unsearchable	The pastoral pivot: the question is not whether God is great but whether He has forgotten us; the answer: the greatness just catalogued means He cannot be ignorant of or indifferent to His people
29–31	He gives power to the faint; He increases strength to the powerless. Youths faint and grow weary; but those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength — they shall mount up with wings like eagles	The climax: the incomparable God’s power becomes the resource of those who wait. “Wait” (qavah) — hopeful, expectant trust. The movement: eagles soaring → running → walking; exhaustion met not with

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		circumstances changed but with strength renewed from above

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–11	The Announcement: Comfort Has Come — the Herald’s Commission
2	12–26	The Argument: The Incomparable God — Four Questions No Idol Can Answer
3	27–31	The Application: The Waiting People — Strength Renewed for the Exhausted

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The incomparable LORD speaks sovereign comfort to His exhausted, despairing people.

Primary Claim: God is confronting the despair of His people not with circumstances changed but with His own incomparable character revealed — calling them to discover that waiting on the LORD is not a counsel of resignation but the only path to renewed strength.

Applications (Five)

1. Reframe what “help” looks like when God answers despair. (*Mind/belief*) The exiles expected God to change their circumstances; He responded by revealing His character. This is the chapter’s most disorienting move — and it is the move God consistently makes with His people. When you are in a season where God has not changed your circumstances, Isaiah 40 is calling you to consider that He may be doing something more durable than relief: He may be re-forming your understanding of who He is. The comfort He offers is not a better situation but an encounter with the God who holds every situation in His hand. This is not a consolation prize — it is the greater gift.

2. Sit before the incomparability section until the idol you are trusting feels genuinely small. (*Affections/worship*) Verses 12–26 are not a doctrinal lecture; they are a sustained doxological assault on misplaced confidence. The rhetorical questions are designed to make every rival — every plan, every powerful person, every medical prognosis, every financial strategy that has become your functional savior — feel as absurd as an artisan bowing to a piece of wood he burned for warmth. The passage is asking you not to think differently about idols but to *feel* differently about them — to have the affections recalibrated by the vision of God’s actual scale. Do not rush past the middle section to get to verse 31. The eagles’ wings of verse 31 are only available to those who have first been wrecked by verses 12–26.

3. Name the specific despair-thought you are rehearsing and submit it to the counter-testimony of verse 28. (*Mind/belief*) Verse 27 quotes Israel’s actual complaint verbatim: “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God.” This is the chapter’s diagnostic. The problem is not that Israel lacked theological knowledge about God’s power; the problem is that they had a specific, articulated conviction that God was ignoring *them*. The application is not generic — name the thought. “God does not see what is happening to my marriage.” “God does not notice how long I have been faithful with so little.” “My situation has been forgotten.” Then submit that named thought to verse 28: “Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth, does not faint or grow weary; His understanding is unsearchable.” The text is not asking for optimism; it is asking for a confrontation between the lie you are believing and the truth God is declaring.

4. Stop treating “waiting on the LORD” as spiritual inaction and begin practicing it as the most demanding act of trust available to you. (*Will/behavior*) The Hebrew *qavah* — “wait” — carries the image of a twisted cord, threads wound together under tension. It is not passive; it is active expectation directed at a specific object. Waiting on the LORD means organizing your day, your prayers, your conversations, and your decisions around the conviction that He is about to act — that the God of verse 28 is working in the dark valley you cannot see through. Practically: where are you currently improvising your own escape from a situation God has called you to trust Him in? Waiting on the LORD means stopping the improvisation and directing that energy toward expectant prayer.

5. Bring the exhausted people in your life to this chapter rather than to your own counsel. (*Will/behavior*) Verses 29–31 describe people who have already run out — “youths faint and grow weary, young men fall exhausted.” The chapter exists because some of God’s people are not going to find their way back to strength through better circumstances, better advice, or better spiritual effort. They need a herald who says “Behold your God!” (v. 9) — who points away from circumstances and toward the incomparable God. The application is structural: when someone you know is in genuine exhaustion or despair, resist the instinct to solve the problem or offer comfort from your own resources. Open Isaiah 40. Read it with them. Let the text make the argument it is designed to make.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Isaiah 40 is one of the richest single-chapter arguments for the doctrine of God in all of Scripture. It establishes the LORD's incomparability across four domains: creation (vv. 12–17), worship (vv. 18–20), history (vv. 21–24), and astronomy (vv. 25–26). In doing so, it teaches that God's power is not a scaled-up version of human power but is categorically different — He is not the strongest being in the cosmos but the one to whom the cosmos is as a drop in a bucket. The chapter also insists on divine attentiveness alongside divine transcendence: the God who calls each star by name (v. 26) is the same God who notices when His people believe they have been forgotten (v. 27). This holds together omnipotence and intimacy — the twin threats of despair (He doesn't care) and fear (He is too great to approach) are both dismantled simultaneously. Finally, the chapter presents God's word as the irreducible ground of comfort: "the word of our God will stand forever" (v. 8) — which means the comfort of verse 1 is as permanent as the God who spoke it.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Isaiah 40 is a foundational text for the Reformed understanding of divine sovereignty and grace. The incomparability of God established here is not primarily abstract metaphysics — it is the ground of His people's assurance. The nations are "less than nothing" before Him (v. 17), which means no empire, no exile, and no force in history can ultimately frustrate His purposes for His covenant people — a truth the New Testament unpacks as the security of all who are in Christ (Romans 8:31–39, which mirrors Isaiah 40's structure almost exactly). The chapter also displays the Reformed principle that salvation is accomplished entirely from the divine side: the comfort announced in verse 1 is not earned by Israel's response but declared before Israel has done anything — and it is delivered by a Servant (Isaiah 53) who takes the iniquity (v. 2) upon Himself. Furthermore, the call to "wait on the LORD" (v. 31) models what Reformed theology describes as the proper posture of faith — not human striving that earns divine assistance, but the rest of those who have seen God's character and trust His word. The strength renewed is entirely His gift; the waiting is the vessel, not the payment.

Main Takeaway

The God of Isaiah 40 is not a theological category — He is the living One who measured the oceans in the palm of His hand and who knows your name, your exhaustion, and the specific despair-thought you have been rehearsing. He has not changed your circumstances; He has shown you Himself, which is the greater gift. Stop waiting for relief and start waiting on the LORD — because those who do will find that the God who holds

the stars in place has more than enough strength to carry you through whatever valley has convinced you He has forgotten you.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Preaching verse 31 in isolation from verses 12–26.** “They shall mount up with wings like eagles” is one of the most extracted verses in the Old Testament. Preached alone, it becomes a motivational promise — strength for those who try hard enough to wait. Preached in context, it is the climax of an overwhelming argument: the God who is incomparably great in creation, worship, history, and astronomy is the God who gives strength to the faint. The promise is only as large as the God behind it. Do not give people verse 31 without first walking them through the incomparability section. Eagles’ wings come from the God of verses 12–26, or they come from nowhere.
- **Spiritualizing the passage away from real despair.** Verses 27–31 record a specific complaint from real people who genuinely believed God was ignoring them. The pastoral function of this passage is not to celebrate God’s greatness in general but to confront the particular conviction that God has abandoned *me*. Preachers who float at the level of doxology without landing on the specific despair the passage is addressing will comfort no one who most needs this chapter. Name the complaint of verse 27. Preach it as a real thought that real people are having.
- **Moralizing “wait on the LORD” as a spiritual discipline.** There is a version of this sermon in which waiting becomes a technique — a spiritual practice the faithful perform, which activates the promise. This inverts the text. The waiting is not a meritorious condition; it is the natural posture of those who have been exposed to the God of verses 12–26. The chapter produces the waiting through the proclamation. Preachers should present “wait on the LORD” as a gift that the proclamation creates, not a requirement the congregation must now go achieve.
- **Flattening the warrior/shepherd tension of verses 9–11.** Verse 10 presents God as a mighty warrior coming with recompense; verse 11 presents Him gathering lambs in His arms and gently leading nursing ewes. These are not two different aspects of God to be harmonized — they are the full picture held in tension. A God only powerful enough to conquer is terrifying; a God only gentle enough to carry is insufficient. Preaching that reduces God to either the warrior or the shepherd has not preached the God of this passage. Preach the tension.
- **Missing the chapter’s connection to the Servant Songs that follow.** Isaiah 40 announces “comfort” and “pardon” (v. 2) without yet explaining how pardon is possible. The answer arrives in Isaiah 52–53: the Servant who bears iniquity is the mechanism by which the comfort of chapter 40 is delivered. Preaching Isaiah 40 as a self-contained chapter risks leaving the comfort unexplained at its theological

root. A brief forward reference — or a concluding movement to the cross — grounds the comfort in atonement rather than leaving it suspended as an unexplained divine decision.

- **Ignoring the idol polemic in application.** Verses 18–20 are not a historical curiosity about ancient Near Eastern idol manufacture — they are a diagnostic of the universal human tendency to fashion a manageable god. The preacher who does not help the congregation see what their functional idols are (the plans, the people, the savings accounts, the health, the reputation that have become their operative source of security) has left the idol polemic in the ancient world rather than dragging it into the present. The absurdity of bowing to a log must be made to feel as absurd as whatever the congregation is actually trusting in place of the LORD.