



Week 1 – Prophecies of Salvation and Judgement



Introduction by Darren Street

Our first session looks at the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of the messiah. We look particularly at two Old Testament prophecies (Isaiah 40 and Malachi 3) that are used in Handel's Messiah to set the background to the story. To understand these passages it is useful to remind ourselves of some of the history of Israel that is recorded throughout the Old Testament.

The nation of Israel were a people chosen by God. A nation hand-picked to demonstrate what it looked like to be the people of the true and living God. In Genesis Chapter 12 God makes a promise to Abraham that from him would come a great nation:

"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

(Genesis 12:1-2)

This promise is repeated in Genesis 15 when God gives Abraham a striking visual aid:

He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

(Genesis 15:5)

So it is quite clear that God intends to bless Abraham's descendants abundantly. He would be their God and they would be His people, an example to the world of how God wanted people to live.

Unfortunately Israel were not very good at living the holy life that God wanted them to live. They often turned away from God and went their own way. The history of the Old Testament is a constant flip-flopping of the people of God turning away from him and doing their own thing, then when things go badly wrong they turn back to God again. Things go well for a while but then they go their own way again and things go wrong again. In fact the name Israel means "one who wrestles with God" (Genesis 32:28). This pattern is repeated

throughout the Old Testament but it gets gradually worse (it has been described as a downward spiral).

In the midst of it all, God does some extraordinary things for the people of Israel. He leads them out of slavery in Egypt, even taking them through the middle of the Red Sea. But they are still rebellious so God leads them through the desert, leading them by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. To make it clear to them what God expects of them, God gives Moses the 10 commandments for His people. But before Moses has even come down from the mountain the people have collected their jewellery and other gold together and melted it down to make a god of their own to worship!

In spite of all of this God still leads them into a land of their own. At its heart, the city of Jerusalem. But the people are STILL rebellious. Israel have good kings and bad kings but overall their rebellion is getting worse.

Isaiah is sent as a prophet with a message for Israel.

Isaiah's message is two-fold:

1. Their rebellion will come at a cost – they will be overthrown by their enemies, they will be cut down to size by Assyria and then Babylon
2. A message of hope – God will keep his promises. A king will come from David's line, Israel will still be His people, the new king will lead them in obedience, God will bless the nations just as he promised Abraham.

So Isaiah sets out this message of judgement and hope for Jerusalem. The old Jerusalem of rebellion, idolatry and injustice will be destroyed. In its place there will be a new Jerusalem, a place of justice and peace for all nations.

True to form, Israel are hard-hearted and refuse to listen. And sure enough, 100 years later Babylon attacks the city of Jerusalem and destroys it, taking the people into exile.

Isaiah 40 addresses a people who are in exile in Babylon. A people who are trying to make sense of everything that has happened. Has God forgotten them? Is the god of Babylon stronger than the God of Israel? Have they blown it with God? Are they still God's people? Is it all over?

Isaiah 40 is a message of hope for an exiled people. God has not forgotten them, they are still his people, this is all part of his plan. Help is on the way, prepare the way for a new king in Israel, God's king... The Messiah!



VIDEO: Handel's Messiah – Comfort ye my people

Watch here: <https://youtu.be/2Pz9BCMFoP8>



Passages and questions to consider

*Each passage is printed in both King James Version and New International Version.
The verses used by Handel are highlighted in **bold**.*

Isaiah 40:1-5

KJV ¹ **Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. ² Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned:** for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins. ³ **The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see *it* together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken *it*.**

NIV ¹ Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

1. Isaiah 40 begins with a message of comfort from God. Why might this message be a surprise, given what God has done in the past (see verse 2)?
2. According to verse 3, whose expected arrival is going to bring about the comfort God promises?
3. Verses 3 and 4 talk about the preparations that need to be made. Can you remember how these verses are understood by the Gospel-writers? In particular, who is it in the New Testament who carries out the work of preparation, and how?
4. Can you think of at least three different ways in which God's glory was revealed (v5) in the earthly ministry of Jesus?

Malachi 3:1-3

KJV ¹ Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and **the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.** ² **But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he *is* like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap:** ³ And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: **and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.**

NIV ¹ The LORD says: 'I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,' says the LORD Almighty. ² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness.

5. This passage from Malachi also talks about being prepared for God's arrival. What major problem does Malachi anticipate (v2)? Is this a real problem or is Malachi exaggerating?
6. How did Jesus fulfil Malachi's prophecy about purification (v3)?
7. Why do you think these passages from Isaiah and Malachi were chosen for Handel's *Messiah*?