

## DEUTERO (Second) ISAIAH

### The Book of Consolation

### Chapters 40-55

**Historical setting.** Whereas the author of First Isaiah addressed the people of Judah (the southern kingdom) *prior* to the Babylonian exile, the author of Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55) was an exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC addressing his fellow exiles seeking to give them hope and consolation.

At the time when deutero-Isaiah is ministering to his people in exile, a huge shift in their political world is taking place. Cyrus, King of Persia, is in the process of overthrowing the Babylonians, the oppressors of the exiles. In addition, he has a very different attitude towards exiles in his territory. Cyrus does not believe, as the Babylonians do, that deportation and resettlement is the best way to control conquered peoples. Instead, Cyrus allows them to return to their lands of origin, to rebuild their cities and sanctuaries, and to reestablish religious customs and practices.

The books of Nehemiah and Ezra tell the story of how the Israelites return to their native land, rebuild their cities and Temple, and reestablish their religion.

**Purpose of Second Isaiah.** The purpose of the anonymous author of chapters 40-55 is to console, encourage and inspire the disillusioned, faint-hearted exiles who see no hope of returning to Jerusalem and are in danger of being won over to the pagan idolatry of the Babylonians. In contrast to First Isaiah and other prophets who speak words of doom, Second Isaiah mainly speaks words of comfort and consolation. Chapter 40 opens with the words: *“Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God.”* Because of the positive, uplifting tone of chapters 40-55, Second Isaiah has been subtitled *The Book of Consolation*. Israel’s time of punishment for her infidelity to her covenant with God is over. Second Isaiah portrays a God whose arms are reaching out to a disheartened people, a God planning to bring about a new Exodus. In an attempt to encourage his fellow downhearted exiles, the anonymous author of these chapters will often stress the following truths:

- God is all powerful. In contrast, all human flesh (power) is nothing.
- God is the creator of the universe; saving Israel is a small matter.
- God plans to save Israel because he has a mission for her, namely, to be a light to all the nations.

- God will raise up a suffering servant to save the world. A unique feature of Second Isaiah is the series of four “servant songs” (42:1-7, 49:1-7, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12) that speak about a mysterious figure whose suffering for the sake of others’ sinfulness will restore integrity to God’s people.

**The author.** We do not know the name of the author of Second Isaiah, or how long he preached, or anything about his background, except that he was among the exiles in Babylon. *“He has hidden his identity behind the great prophet Isaiah so that those who hear or read his prophecies will see only the continuity of what God is doing from Isaiah’s age to his own”* (Lawrence Boadt). His writing is so beautiful that he has been called the Dante of the Old Testament.

**Division of chapters.** The fifteen chapters of Second Isaiah are usually divided into two parts:

**Part 1:** Israel’s liberation from Babylon (Chapters 40-48)

**Part 2:** Restoration and salvation through suffering (Chapters 49-55)

#### COMMENTARY

#### PART 1: LIBERATION FROM BABYLON (Chapters 40-48)

##### CHAPTER 40: Proclamation of release from exile

*“Comfort, give comfort to my people.... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt expiated....”* (vv 1-2)

Like an overture to a good piece of music, chapter 40 summarizes in beautiful poetry all the key themes of chapters 40-55: comfort, God’s mercy and power, and the power of his word. At a time when the exiles are most discouraged, God speaks words of comfort, mercy and of his power to save. The above words are spoken to a people who lament in Psalm 137: *“By the rivers of Babylon we sat mourning and weeping”* (v.1).

**Verses 1-11** are set in a divine assembly from where the following series of divine commands are issued:

- Israel’s time, punishment and pain are at an end. (vv 1-2)

- A new exodus is announced. (vv 3-5)
- There is no need for Israel to fear Babylon. (vv 6-8)
- Let Jerusalem announce to her daughter cities that God is leading back the exiles as a shepherd leads his flock.

**Verses 12-31—our incomparable God.** The theme of these verses is the awesome nature of our God, which respond to questions the exiles may have about God’s ability to bring about liberation. After all, they have experienced the power of the Babylonians and their gods to humiliate them.

We have here in a threefold oracle (vv 12-17, 18-24, 25-31) in which is asked a series of rhetorical questions concerning the creation of the world. The implied answer to all the questions is that God alone is the One who created all things. He alone is all powerful. The writer repeats the question: Do you not know, have you not heard of this all-powerful God?

**Pause:** How have you experienced the comforting presence of God?

#### CHAPTER 41: God, the Liberator of Israel

*“Present your case,” says the Lord; “bring forward your reasons,” says the King of Jacob. (v.21)*

The nations are called to bear witness to the mighty acts of God in history.

**Verse 2** refers to Cyrus whom God has raised up to be a “champion of justice” and summoned him to be his attendant. While all the nations will tremble before Cyrus (v.5), Israel need not fear him, for God is with her (vv 8-16).

**Verses 21-29.** The false gods of the nations are on trial, with God as their judge. God challenges them to prove their divinity by predicting the future (vv 22-23), or by explaining how things began (v.22), or by doing anything at all, good or evil, to demonstrate their power.

#### CHAPTER 42: The first servant song

*“Here is my servant whom I will uphold, My chosen one in whom I am well pleased, Upon whom I will put my spirit....” (v.1)*

*“The servant will be a light to the nations and will open the eyes of the blind....” (vv 6-7)*

Now we come to the first of four very famous songs or poems in Second Isaiah. The identity of the servant in the four servant songs has been a big debate amongst scholars. At times it seems the author has an individual in mind, and other times he seems to be alluding to Israel. Some scholars think that the servant is a symbolic figure intended to represent the best ideals in Israel. The authors of the gospels saw the figure of the suffering Christ, especially in the fourth servant song. As we read the texts of the four servant songs, we may image a very holy servant of God called to bring justice and light to the nations. Or we may perceive the servant as a holy community, a wonderful witness of godly values to all around them. It will be easy enough for us to see in the servant the person of Christ who very much embodied all of the characteristics of the suffering servant.

**Verse 1** tells us that the servant is someone very close to God, “one in whom God is well pleased” (words spoken at the baptism of Jesus). The servant is not one who has to depend on his own strength to do God’s work; rather, he is endowed with God’s spirit that empowers him to do great and awesome things.

The *mission* of the servant is to “bring forth justice to the nations.” The notion of ‘justice’ in Second Isaiah is bigger than we normally consider it. *“It is nothing less than to put God’s plans for his people into full effect, to make the truth about the Lord, Israel’s God, known everywhere, especially the fact that he alone is the sovereign creator and Lord of history”* (Barry Webb).

The servant will come not as a conquering hero such as we have in human history, but as a gentle figure, the kind of figure imaged in Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey on Palm Sunday.

The mission of the servant includes *“opening the eyes of the blind, bringing out prisoners from confinement and from the dungeons those who live in darkness”* (v.7). The Servant’s task is to undo all the horrendous and degrading effects that sin has had on the human race and to restore to people their true freedom and dignity as sons and daughters of God.

#### **Verses 10-17—a hymn of praise to our warrior God.**

In verses 10-12, the writer calls on all creation to give praise to God. Verse 14 tells us that salvation is not won easily. God’s victory is compared to *“a woman in labor gasping and panting.”*

**Verses 18-25—*a stinging rebuke to Israel.*** These verses are an exception to the general positive tone of Second Isaiah. Israel has been deaf to God’s word and blind to his purposes. In this, they are no better than their ancestors whose stubborn rebelliousness led to the punishment of the exiles.

**CHAPTER 43: “You are precious in my sight.”**

*“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. ...You are precious in my eyes...and I love you.”* (v.4)

The above text is regarded as one of the tenderest passages in all of scripture. It is often used in directed retreats where retreatants are invited to sit with the truth that each one of them is “called by name” and each one is “precious in God’s eyes.”

**Pause:** To what extent do you believe that you are ‘precious in God’s eyes’? What can help us to believe this word more deeply in our hearts? What can hinder us from believing it?

**Verses 8-15—“You are my witnesses.”** These verses depict a judicial trial. At issue is the question of who among the rival deities could rightfully be declared the true God. Israel, now purified, will be a witness for God (v.10).

**Verses 18-19** are well known verses from this chapter: *“Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see I am doing something new. Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”* The author is not telling the exiles to forget the exodus and the Mt. Sinai event, but to wake up to the new event, the new exodus that God is about to make happen.

**Verses 22-28.** Israel is on trial for her infidelity to God.

**Pause:** How easy is it for you to let go of past hurts?

**CHAPTER 44: The futility of false gods**

*“Idol makers all amount to nothing, and their precious works are of no avail”* (v.9).

The first five verses of this chapter really belong in the previous chapter. God speaks comforting words to the exiles. Salvation is coming their way.

**Verses 6-20** reach their climax in verse 17 when the idol maker foolishly kneels down in front of his idol and asks it to rescue him. How foolish!

**Verses 24-28.** After affirming himself as the creator of all things, God reveals how he also uses Cyrus to move his plans forward. Cyrus, the pagan king, is God’s shepherd, setting the exiles free and helping them to rebuild Jerusalem, a story told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

**CHAPTER 45: “I am the Lord, there is no other.”**

*“I am the Lord and there is no other, there is no God besides me.”* (v.5)

*“To me every knee shall bend; by me every tongue shall swear.”* (v.23)

After pointing out again that Cyrus is God’s anointed servant, the prophet goes on to speak about the uniqueness of God. There is no one like him, no one has his power. Several times in this chapter, we hear the words: *“I am the Lord, there is no other.”*

**CHAPTER 46: Gods that are carried versus a God who carries**

*“They (the idols) must be borne up on shoulders, carried as burdens by the weary.”* (v.1)

*“I (God) will carry you to safety.”* (v.4)

In this chapter, the silliness of heavy idols being carried by weary animals is contrasted to God who carries Israel out of exile. The gods of the empire that defeated and banished the remnant of Israel are now being carried into exile.

**CHAPTER 47: A taunting poem about the fall of Babylon**

*“Come now, sit in the dust, O virgin daughter of Babylon.”* (v.1)

A taunt song filled with vengeance was popular in ancient times. In this case, the gloating and sense of vengeance are intensified by the fact that the Babylonians humiliated Jerusalem. The taunt played a part in rebuilding the self-esteem of the Jewish community.

## CHAPTER 48: Israel's failure to listen to God

*"You neither heard nor knew, they did not reach your ears beforehand" (v.8).*

Israel is strongly condemned for her stubbornness and failure to listen to the Lord. *"If only you had listened to my commandments" (v.18).* Yet despite past failure, they will get another chance. *"Let them go forth therefore from Babylon..." (vv 20-29).*

## PART 2: RESTORATION AND SALVATION THROUGH SUFFERING (Chapters 49-55)

### CHAPTER 49: The second servant song

*"Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly spent my strength, yet my reward is with the Lord...." (v.4)*

**Verses 1-6.** In my earlier introduction to the four servant songs, I have said that there is no agreement amongst scholars as to the identity of the servant. This second servant song explains the reason for the confusion. In verses 1 and 2, the servant appears to be an individual, maybe Jeremiah or the author himself. In verse 3, the servant is Israel.

Irrespective of who the servant is—individual or community—its mission is to manifest God and be a light to the nations.

**Verses 7-26.** Israel, despised by the nations, will cause kings and princes to look on in amazement when they see God reverse her fortunes and lead her back in triumph from bondage to freedom. To the despondent, God promises the rebuilding and repopulation of their ravaged homeland (14-23).

*"Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even if she should forget, I will never forget you" (v. 15).* This is one of the best known and most loved of all scripture texts. The female experience of loving her child is used to describe God's great love for us.

**Pause:** God, being pure spirit, is neither male nor female. He transcends both but is imaged in the Bible as both male and female.

Are you surprised when you read of female images of God in the Bible? (See also Lk 15:8-10.)

## CHAPTER 50: Third servant song

*"The Lord has given me a well-trained tongue, that I may know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them. Morning after morning, he opens my ears that I may hear...." (v.4)*

In this third servant song, the servant lets us in on a very personal reflection of God's workings in his life. He is the teacher who is first taught: *"Morning after morning he opens his ears that I may hear...a word that will rouse the weary" (v.4).* Then he speaks of the physical and mental suffering that he endures. He is able to endure the abuse heaped upon him because God is close and holds his hand.

### CHAPTERS 51:1-52:12: A rousing call to awake

*"Awake, awake! Arise, O Jerusalem." (v.17)*

**Verses 1-8.** The prophet recalls how Abraham is promised numerous descendants while Sarah is yet barren. During the exile, Zion is barren as Sarah, but it too will become fertile.

In 41:9-52:12, we have a long oracle or word structured in a threefold call to "awake."

- The first call is addressed to "the arm of the Lord," urging him to repeat his wonderful deeds of old. (51: 9-16)
- The second call is addressed to Jerusalem who is told that the cup of God's wrath that she had to drink has now been given to Israel's enemies. (51: 17-23)
- The third call is addressed to Zion who is urged to put on God's strength. (52:1-12)

### CHAPTERS 52:12-53:12: The fourth servant song

*"Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured... He was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins,...by his stripes we were healed (vv 4-5)*

This is by far the best known of the four servant songs. It is the first reading for our Good Friday service. Traditionally, Christians have seen this prophecy as referring to the passion of Jesus. The text presents a model of piety or spirituality which states that suffering can have a positive purpose. This is a break from a long biblical tradition that regarded suffering as a punishment for sin. The mission of the servant, to

which the Jews are called, is to accept unmerited suffering patiently and to serve as an example to the nations.

As with the other servant songs, there is the issue of the identity of the servant. We don't believe that the writer had Jesus in mind. Once again, the servant could be some wonderful individual, or Israel in an idealized form.

Commenting on this servant's song, scripture scholar Sr. Carol Dempsey, O.P. writes:

*The song can be divided into four parts: a divine speech, a report; a divine reflection; a divine speech. The main orator is God, who speaks through the poet-prophet to teach a lesson by way of example and reflection. The lesson assures the righteous and sinners alike and all who are enduring the suffering of exile that there is hope that God's vision is for all to be saved.*

- *The song opens with a portrait of the servant described by God. A disfigured and repulsive human being, the servant will take nations and kings by surprise and will astonish them.*
- *Following the servant's portrait is a report by an anonymous group. The "we" is obscure and could be a group of Israelites living in exile. The suffering of the servant is described in detail, and the speakers come to realize in retrospect why the servant has been suffering so severely. The suffering is not on account of sins of divine chastisement rather, the servant suffers because he is identifying with the sickness and pain of his people and the oppression that such infirmities bring. Through the use of sheep imagery in a simile, the poet presents the speakers acknowledging their waywardness and the suffering it has caused to the servant.*
- *A divine reflection follows the report. Images from the agrarian world – lamb, sheep – capture the innocence of the servant who remained silent in the midst of undeserved suffering. Such suffering is not without a divinely promised reward.*
- *The poem closes with a divine teaching. The servant becomes "the righteous one"; the dishonorable one becomes the honorable one. Hence, the mission of the servant will entail pain, suffering, rejection, and being misunderstood. The servant's greatest hope, then, is in and with God.*

**Verse 10.** The most troublesome part in the fourth servant poem is verse 10 which says: *"But the Lord was pleased to crush him (the servant) in infirmity."* It gives the impression that God derives pleasure from crushing one of his most loyal servants. This could lead us to believe that God delights in our sufferings. Could this be true? Surely not. What pleased God is the servant's willingness to suffer for the salvation of others. It would be like our admiration for Martin Luther King's willingness to suffer for the liberation of others, or a mother to sacrifice and suffer on behalf of her children.

**Verses 10-12.** God may be the speaker who affirms the value of the servant's sacrifice and death. From it, many will benefit. *"He shall take away the sins of many and win pardon for their offenses"* (v.12).

**Pause:** Have you had the experience in which suffering led to positive things in your life?

#### CHAPTER 54: The wrath and love of God

*"For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with great tenderness I will take you back. In an outburst of wrath, for a moment I hid my face from you, but with enduring love, I take pity on you."* (vv 7-8)

Chapter 54 describes the new Israel, idealized as a barren wife rejected for a time but then taken back by God to become the bountiful mother of a new Israel.

#### CHAPTER 55: An invitation to grace

*"All you who are thirsty come to the water; you who have no money, come, receive grain and eat...."* (v.1)

*"Seek the Lord while he may be found, call to him while he is still near."*(v.6)

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your way my ways, says the Lord."*(v.8)

*"For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats."*(v.10)

This final chapter of Second Isaiah has several beautiful verses as we can see from the above examples.

The chapter opens with a beautiful invitation to come to the Lord's banquet table. *All* are invited. The only requirement is hunger and thirst.

*Verses 6-9* are a call to repentance, a call to “seek the Lord” and “call upon him.”

The verse that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts challenges us to put aside human pride and submit to God’s often difficult and mysterious ways.

*Verses 10-11* speak of the power of God’s word to achieve what it sets out to do. God’s plans will not be thwarted.

**Pause:** What verse speaks to you most in chapter 55?