

Lesson 21 Isaiah 40:12-31 The Creator God – The Ground of Comfort

Introduction

Isaiah 40:12-31 is an amazing poetic reflection on the nature of the incomparable, Creator God of Israel. The beauty of the passage lends itself to being read and quoted without giving attention to the reason it is in Isaiah 40 in the first place. Why is this wonderful description of God here? Isaiah has just communicated God's commissioning of heralds to comfort the future generation living in exile in Babylon. This passage continues the consolation of Zion. To address this passage in context, we have to consider what the attributes of the Creator God have to do with comfort during a time of suffering.

Isaiah began the message of comfort in 40:1-11 with three voices of hope. Hope in the glory of the Lord, hope in the Word of the Lord, hope in the arm of the Lord. For hope in the glory of the Lord, the Word of the Lord, the arm of the Lord to be sustained through suffering, for that hope to continue we must have confidence in who God is.

At the beginning of suffering or grief, our emotional state is overwhelmed. We need comfort and care. I am reminded of the time Elijah, depressed by the lack of change in Israel after the defeat of the prophets of Baal, left Israel and walked all the way through Judah into the southern wilderness. He was done. He was leaving. He laid down under a tree to die, telling God, "I am no better than my fathers. I could not bring about change in faithless Israel." God did not confront Elijah at that moment. God let him sleep. Then God gave him fresh bread and water and told him to sleep more. And again he found fresh bread and water. Then God told him to walk to Mount Sinai. He still hasn't corrected Elijah's way of understanding his experience. Through that walk, Elijah didn't get one word of correction from God. He got a lot of physical activity. He got time to think. He got a place to go. We are not told what went on in his mind during that long walk to Sinai. But when he got to Sinai, God met him and spoke both comforting and challenging words. It was time to shake Elijah out of himself a little bit. "No Elijah. You are not the only prophet left in Israel. That is not true. In fact, there are another 7000." God could have told him that at the beginning. God doesn't. He gives him bread, and water, and rest. But at some time he needs help moving out of the spiral; a little push forward to a new perspective.

That's where we are in Isaiah 40:12-31. This is not the beginning of the lament process. If you want the beginning of the lament over exile, read Lamentations. There is only one brief hopeful word in the whole book. It's right in the center, but out of all of those verses in Lamentations, there is hardly any hope at all. It is the collective, emotional cry of Israel right after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. That was not the time for a new perspective. That was a time for weeping.

Isaiah is writing now to those who have already been in exile for about 70 years. Israel's time of hard service is over. They have paid back double for their sin. They have been exhorted to hope. That was the message of 40:1-11. Now they need to be shaken a little. They need to be reminded to look up and see God. Because to hope in God, they need to know with confidence in who God truly is.

They need to see how much bigger God is than their own experiences. They also need to know if God cares. And they need to know if God is willing and able to do anything about their suffering. Questions about suffering always come back to the nature of God. Ultimately, it has got to come back to who do you believe God is? Do you know God well enough, deep enough to hope in Him, no matter what you're going through? Can you hold on to Him? Can you trust Him? Can you wait on Him to bring you through? That's where we are in Isaiah 40:12-31.

I'm going to the whole passage, just get the whole thing at once, and then we'll go through their three major parts, and then we'll take each of the three parts in turn. Isaiah 40:12-31.

The Passage: Isaiah 40:12–31

12	Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,	And marked off the heavens by the span, And weighed the mountains in a balance And the hills in a pair of scales?
13	Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD,	Or as His counselor has informed Him?
14	With whom did He consult, <i>who</i> gave Him understanding? Taught Him knowledge	And <i>who</i> taught Him in the path of justice And informed Him of the way of understanding?
15	Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust.	And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales;
16	Even Lebanon is not enough to burn,	Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering.
17	All the nations are as nothing before Him,	They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless.
18	To whom then will you liken God?	Or what likeness will you compare with Him?
19	As <i>for</i> the idol, a craftsman casts it, And a silversmith <i>fashions</i> chains of silver.	A goldsmith plates it with gold,
20	He who is too impoverished for <i>such</i> an offering He seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman	Selects a tree that does not rot; To prepare an idol that will not totter.
21	Do you not know? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning?	Have you not heard? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
22	It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain	And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.
23	He <i>it is</i> who reduces rulers to nothing,	Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless.
24	Scarcely have they been planted, scarcely have They been sown, But He merely blows on them, and they wither,	Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth, And the storm carries them away like stubble.
25	“To whom then will you liken Me	That I would be <i>his</i> equal?” says the Holy One.
26	Lift up your eyes on high The One who leads forth their host by number, Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of <i>His</i> power,	And see who has created these <i>stars</i> , He calls them all by name; Not one <i>of them</i> is missing.
27	Why do you say, O Jacob, “My way is hidden from the LORD,	and assert, O Israel, And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God”?
28	Do you not know? The Everlasting God, the LORD, Does not become weary or tired.	Have you not heard? the Creator of the ends of the earth His understanding is inscrutable.
29	He gives strength to the weary,	And to <i>him who</i> lacks might He increases power.
30	Though youths grow weary and tired,	And vigorous young men stumble badly,
31	Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; They will run and not get tired,	They will mount up <i>with</i> wings like eagles, They will walk and not become weary.

That’s awesome! This passage divides into three parts, verses 12-20; 21-26; and 27-31. Each of the three parts takes a slightly different approach to the reader. The first part is a rhetorical invitation to reflection about the nature of God. “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?” The second part is more of a challenge. “Do you not know? Have you not heard?” And the third is an exhortation to apply what you ought to know. “Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the LORD?’”

needs of human beings, it is still a psychological construct. We are saying there is a real Creator God who really made stuff out of nothing. And when you compare the power and wisdom of the one true Creator God to all other gods, they really are sticks of wood covered with gold set in place by human beings, who have to prop them up so that they will not totter and fall.

But however advanced their religion and theology is, it is a human creation that does not compare at all to a real God, who can really create a Universe. Isaiah mocks two ideas here. First, he mocks the idea that any image can adequately capture the nature of who God is. How does an idol truly represent God? And we have to include the image of a lion or a lamb. God is not a lion and God is not a lamb. God is not a baby born at Christmas. God is not a man crucified on a cross. Those images convey particular truths about who God is, but each image also lacks other truths about who God is. God transcends physical reality. There is no image, there is no theological system that can fully, comprehensively, accurately representation the nature of who God is. God is unique.

The second idea mocked here is that human beings can create their own gods. We do not define God. God defines us. True religion cannot be man-made. True knowledge, true worship, true moral practice must be communicated by God to us. We do not have in ourselves the wisdom, the spiritual insight, the moral goodness necessary to comprehend or describe the nature of God. We have flashes of insight because God has placed something of Himself in us. So some true morality is in all religions, pretty much all religions. We are fashioned in His image. We should not confuse our innate attraction to the truth about who God is with competency in defining for ourselves the nature of God. Whatever we create will be deeply flawed. We will have to artificially hold up gods of our own making, so that they do not totter and fall. No human religion can compete with the power and wisdom of the true God. He is not like any man. He is not like any god. He is absolutely unique.

Okay, so with verse 20 we've completed the first main part of this passage. Isaiah has invited us to consider the immensity, the wisdom, and the uniqueness of God. Now Isaiah challenges us to admit that knowledge of God's attributes has not been hidden. We should know these things. The challenge to admit knowledge of the Creator God's attributes is in 40:21-26. I'll start with 21-24.

A Challenge to Admit Knowledge of the Creator God's Attributes (40:21-26)

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| ²¹ Do you not know?
Has it not been declared to you from
the beginning? | Have you not heard?
Have you not understood from the foundations
of the earth? |
| ²² It is He who sits above the circle of the earth,
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain | And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,
And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. |
| ²³ He <i>it is</i> who reduces rulers to nothing, | Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless. |
| ²⁴ Scarcely have they been planted, scarcely have
They been sown,
But He merely blows on them, and they wither, | Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth,
And the storm carries them away like stubble. |

Isaiah does not develop the "how" we ought to know. He just says we ought to know. Psalm 19:1-6 and Romans 1:18-23 both argue that the creation itself declares who God is. "Since the creation of the world his invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." So that's Romans 1:20. Psalm 19 and Romans 2 both also argue that God declares truth about Himself in His word. Isaiah could have in mind either the general revelation of the creation, or the specific revelation of God's word, or both. Either way, he is challenging us, "You should know these things about God."

Isaiah makes that claim and then he summarizes what he has already said about the attributes of God. Again, we are made to recognize the immensity of God. God sits above the circle of the Earth. That's not, by the way, a flat Earth confirmation. The Earth is a sphere, not a circle, but if you were high above the Earth looking down on it, you would see a circle, just like we see a circle when we look up in the night sky and there is the full Moon, it looks like this beautiful, white disc in the night sky. So in fact, this is an interesting, accurate description as a poet, if you're saying what God would see as He is looking down, He would see

the circle of the Earth. He would see a disc. We have all seen pictures of it, the beautiful blue and green disc that an astronaut sees from heaven. Then, if you were to look closer, Isaiah says, He would see tiny inhabitants, hopping about like grasshoppers.

God's immensity in creation here is compared to a man setting up a tent. Imagine yourself putting up a tent in your backyard, and you're pulling the poles out of the bag, and you're struggling to stretch the canvas and to get the nylon cords just right, and finally pressing the metallic hooks into the soil to keep it steady, and you're really proud of yourself when you're done. Look what I did, I set up a tent! The Earth is the dwelling place God made for humankind. In Isaiah it's like God has set up a tent. That's how immense God is.

Also again, Isaiah reminds us that the mighty men of Earth, the rulers and the judges, none of them affect the activity and plan of God. God is completely independent and self-sufficient in His planning. They are as nothing, meaningless, in relation to God's sovereign plan for humanity.

Before Isaiah emphasized the tiny size of nations compared to God, here he emphasizes how ephemeral we are. It is one of the themes from our last lesson. How can a particular crop of grass fit into God's long-term plans when it is so quickly gone?

²⁴ Scarcely have they been planted, scarcely have Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth,
They been sown,
But He merely blows on them, and they wither, And the storm carries them away like stubble.

How does human kind affect the will and the plan of God? What is man to God? Not only is he so small, he doesn't last any time at all. Isaiah brings us back to the question of comparison and this time he puts it in the first person. God is speaking.

²⁵ "To whom then will you liken Me That I would be *his* equal?" says the Holy One.

That's interesting. He uses the term "Holy One," because Isaiah is not focusing on the holy character of God. We have that whole vision from chapter 6 and the glory of God coming out of the Temple, and Isaiah's overwhelming sense of sinfulness before God. That's not here, but just by referring to God as the "Holy One of Israel," and because we have been studying Isaiah, just that one reference adds in that whole aspect of God's character, who He is. He is not just mighty. He is not just wise. He is also holy. He is good. Then Isaiah suggests this exercise. If you want to feel a sense of the immensity of God, the power of God, the wisdom of God, go outside on a clear night away from city lights, you know, go out into the mountains or into the countryside, get on a boat and get out into the sea with no lights around and look up into that night sky. The ancients would have seen without electricity. It's just dark and you look up, and what do you see? And how do you feel? I'm betting you've probably felt this before. You've had this experience. Verse 26,

²⁶ Lift up your eyes on high And see who has created these *stars*,
The One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name;
Because of the greatness of His might and Not one *of them* is missing.
the strength of *His* power,

This is powerful at any time because this is just that human experience of being so small in the midst of something so large, at night, alone, looking up at the sky. But this is just one of those places where science just makes it blow up. It's so much bigger than even that. That experience is just suggestive. We know a bit of the reality. I mean, consider the size of the Sun. And remember that each tiny star is a sun. And the vast distance between stars does not bother God. The vast number of stars does not bother God. How many stars can you see at one time in the night sky? I couldn't find out an exact answer. I guess that depends on where you are and how clear it is, what you can see but somewhere between 2 and 5 thousand stars you see. And that's enough to overwhelm. God knows the name of each, Isaiah says. God is aware of what He has created. That's a powerful illustration. But then when

Yes, He is everlasting. He is Creator. He never becomes tired. He is beyond my understanding. I glory in Him. And yet, in recognizing how far above the Universe He is, I feel left behind, alone in the dark. He never grows tired. Well, I certainly grow tired! How can He care about me? And these next verses are where it all comes home. God cares about people. God sees you.

²⁹ He gives strength to the weary,	And to <i>him who</i> lacks might He increases power.
³⁰ Though youths grow weary and tired,	And vigorous young men stumble badly,
³¹ Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength;	They will mount up <i>with</i> wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,	They will walk and not become weary.

God sees His people. God sees you. God cares.

“Though youths grow weary and tired.” That could be a description of the young man worn out by his effort. It is also an apt description of those who have lived a long life. Youths eventually age and grow weary. Young men eventually grow old and stumble badly. It also works as a description of burnout, or depression. The strength of youth keeps you going. But suffering, and grief, and constant toil sap that strength. You lose your vigor. Your feet stumble.

Isaiah holds out this hope. God sees. God cares. You are weary now. Will it always be this way?

³¹ Yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength;	They will mount up <i>with</i> wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,	They will walk and not become weary.

When, Lord? When will this be true of me? Is this a promise for right now? Do I just have to believe and, believing in true faith, will I rise up with the energy of youth?

Maybe. If you're really going through something hard, probably not. That's not what "wait" means. By definition "wait" means, "Not right now. Later. You have to wait on the Lord." Waiting here is an act of faith. Wait for when? Isaiah does not say. If we are speaking of the exile, then those first taken will have to wait seventy years for the return. Those who were born in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, not so long.

When we apply this comfort to our own situations, whatever it may be, we have to wait until God brings us through the suffering, the grief, the toil. It's not a promise for an immediate fix. This is not, "I believe and, all of a sudden, I have this strength of a youth." The situation might even end and yet, you still have a period of waiting. You still need to lament. You have to pass through your grief emotionally and spiritually. You might have a long wait.

One day, you will be able to set your eyes in the direction of the Promised Land. For us now that means setting our eyes on Jesus and His Kingdom. If you are in grief, beaten down, you will one day rise up again. You will run and not be tired, walk and not be weary. One day.

How long? I can't say. Waiting is a faith word. When we are healthy emotionally and spiritually healthy, we may be drained in the evening and invigorated in the morning. We may be tired after work and we're just praying in the car, and we get re-energized by the time we get home, and we can have a great evening with our kids. The wait may be only a moment; it could be a couple of hours; it could be a night, it could be a day. For deep grief and sorrow, wait may be a year or more.

This is also an already-not-yet truth. We can experience the invigoration of the Spirit to some degree in our present. We experience the life of grace now through our union with Jesus. But the complete, everlasting fulfillment of this promise is not yet. We get it already in a part, but not yet completely. We are reinvigorated through this life as we wait on God. At the same time, this is a picture of eternal life with God in a New Heaven and a New Earth. Our life on Earth is, in some sense, an exile from our true home. When we arrive in the Promised Land of the New Heaven and New Earth, we really will regain all the strength and exuberance of youth. Even if we never had strength and exuberance of youth in this life, we will have it there. We will be transformed with new bodies. Our mind and soul will be healthy and full. Our spirit will be in harmony with His Spirit.

Let's end with this. Consider the earlier promises of hope given in 40:1-11. Do you believe in the coming glory of the Lord? Do you believe in the truthfulness of His word? Do you believe in the strength of His arm? As you think about that, consider His character described in 40:12-31. This is the glory I am asking if you believe in. This is the truthfulness of who He is. This is the strength of His arm. Do you confess that His creation power is so far above anything you can imagine? Do you agree that His wisdom outshines your ability to understand and comprehend? Anybody's ability to understand and comprehend! Do you know that the nations are like a drop in the bucket, and yet, do you also believe that He cares about you? That He wants to give you renewed strength? Do you believe He sees you? Do you believe He loves you?

If you do, wait on the Lord. Wait on the Lord. And be comforted. Because...

³¹ Those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength;	They will mount up <i>with</i> wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,	They will walk and not become weary.