

## Reflecting on Isaiah Chapter 40

I strongly suspect that almost all of us have a woefully inadequate understanding of how really great God is. There's probably a spectrum of understanding or knowledge of God among evangelicals from something close to Deism to more biblically-informed and experiential views. All of us however, no matter where we are on that putative spectrum, would be greatly enriched by knowing God more fully. The more and better we know Him the more and better we love Him. So it would be exceedingly useful for us to spend time reflecting on that one tremendous chapter in Isaiah where God reveals His greatness, Chapter 40.

Isaiah Chapter 40 begins a new section of prophecy that extends at least thru Chapter 55 or 57, or more likely to the end of the book. As it stands at the head of a new section dealing with hope in the future for restoration and great blessing, it necessarily begins with a totally awe-inspiring revelation of God. God is magnificent, beautiful, majestic in transcendent glory, powerful in His sovereignty, wonderful to think about. The whole basis for Judah's hope and the assurance they can have of future restoration is God's greatness. What God is going to do in the future, however, is vastly more than just restore Israel, He's going to send a unique, ideal Servant into the world and He's going to change the cosmos. And what He's going to do in the future (the future, that is, from Isaiah's point in time) will benefit someone of His glory. So Chapter 40 introduces the transcendent God of glory.

**"Comfort, comfort"** (v.1). This Hebrew word translated "comfort" will appear 13 times in the coming chapters. God's chosen people are going to experience horrible circumstances (an Exile is coming), but in spite of their circumstances, God is sovereign. He will care for His nation and bless them wonderfully in the future. Judah was given this revelation so that, in view of what God was going to do for them in that future era, they would live righteously. They were to trust, or rest, in that wonderful promise. Do we grasp this same truth in our lives today? I think not! The essence of the Gospel is that, whatever ghastly circumstances we have to experience in this life, we're to rest in God's promise of future blessing that comes to us by faith (ie, trust, resting) in the Person of Christ, the Servant of whom Isaiah wrote. And the Gospel expects us to live *now* as if we're already in our future blessed state. Isaiah 40 is comfort. The Gospel is comfort.

**"And the glory of the Lord will be revealed"** (v. 5). The "glory" that's to be revealed could refer to the Transfiguration and to when Christ returns in splendor and glory to establish the millennial Kingdom. But I think that is too narrow an understanding of this verse. God created this world to reveal the perfections and the beauty, the glory, of the Son. All Scripture, all reality, is to reveal how wonderful the Son is. He is the greatest Person there is in all existence. The purpose of the Bible is to reveal the glory of the Son. Since He has come in the Person of Jesus, all humanity is to honor the Son, whose beauty has been revealed (Psalm 2:12); failure to do so declares the incorrigible character of that individual, worthy of condemnation. Jesus isn't just a unique person able to work miracles. He is God Himself come in the flesh to perfectly reveal the Father exactly as a son repeats or mirrors the character of his father. We're responsible in our loving and trusting obedience to Jesus as to God Himself. I fear too many of us miss that.

**"The word of our God stands forever"** (v. 8b). Isaiah's prophesied words of comfort in the distant future are truthful and certain to be fulfilled because the ultimate Author of them is God Himself. And God so identifies with His Word that our response to His Word, whether it's trusting obedience or it's indifference, is our response to God. Truth is timeless. Thus, for example, the forgiveness offered in the atoning death of Christ retroactively applied to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, etc, all those who responded with faith to something God had said. God's word is timeless truth. Dear reader: be careful of your attitude toward the Bible! Cherish it as you would a personal love-letter from God, read it slowly and thoughtfully, and assiduously obey whatever it says for you to do. Why? Because it's not print on paper, but God speaking personally to you. It's in the Word of God that we encounter the Living God. He speaks to us.

**"His arm rules for Him. See, his reward is with him . . . He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart"** (vv. 10-11). God is powerful. His "arm" represents His awesome power. But His sovereignty is to bless; thus He comes not to punish but with "His reward." He is awesomely powerful, yet gentle to those He loves. Notice how this chapter ends, with God promising enablement. What a God our Creator is! He is omnipotent, ie, infinitely powerful, yet kind, gentle, merciful and loving. How can we not love Him with all our being?

**"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand . . . or marked off the heavens by the breadth of his hand, held the dust of the earth in a basket, weighed the mountains?"** (v. 12). God is not merely immense. He is an *infinite* Being. He cannot be localized in time or space. So He's a Spirit Being. His presence pervades all the cosmos. He knows *everything* that happens, even our thoughts and motives. The entire universe, however vast it is, is His creation as a

father makes a doll-house for his child. He made it in infinitely perfect wisdom (vv. 13-14). The interstellar distances we measure in light-years, God measures by the span of His hand. God is such an infinitely great Person there is no possible way we mortals can measure Him or comprehend Him. Think about this: Our great God knows our names, He knows *us*!

**“Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket, they are regarded as dust on the scales”** (v. 15). Do we get it yet? As fearfully powerful as Assyria was, or the Chaldeans, or any of the great empires of history, they are so tiny to God they’re like a speck of dust. That would include America: Our hydrogen bombs and rockets and super-computers are trivial and meaningless compared to God’s immensity and sovereign power. **“Before him, all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing”** (v. 17). Before we boast about how great our nation is out of patriotic zeal, let’s understand what God’s view of America is, it’s “worthless . . . less than nothing.” God is unique, immense, powerful, and majestic beyond our imagination. God had revealed Himself similarly to Job, and Job repented of his silly chatter and realized how trustworthy and good God is in whatever He does. We should do the same.

**“Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires”** (v. 16). All the trees of the dense forests of Lebanon (just north of Israel) would be inadequate to properly worship Israel’s majestic God. How then do we properly worship God? He has revealed it: By obeying Him and serving Him as He has willed for us to do that, and by imitating His goodness. Supposing we worship Him by singing a few songs or by passively listening to a homily is sheer vanity. God is *a se*. That means He is autonomous, independent and already perfect. He has no needs. So nothing we do, not even our worshipful praises, can add to His glory. All we can do is reflect His glory as a mirror reflects an image of our self. And that pleases Him.

**“What image will you compare him to?”** (v.18). In this next paragraph, God taunts those who worship the lesser gods by making images of them. Those supernatural beings – regardless what authority they have – are represented by idols but are themselves created. Only God is the Creator. And so only God, the God of the Bible, the God of Israel, is to be worshiped. Just as God here mocks man-made idols of metal or wood, he mocks the more intangible idols that we foolishly worship by our misplaced love, priorities in life and sets of values. John’s First Letter warns us of the idols that we worship by believing the lies they tell, by loving self rather than Christ or others in need, or by refusing to live the righteous life that God expects of us. Americans are idolaters; let’s be exceedingly careful about idolatry in the Church.

**“He stretches out the heavens like a canopy”** (v. 22b). Our vaunted science-based cosmology is phony. It rests on unproven and un-provable assumptions, but the whole western world believes it because it contradicts this verse (and a few others). The universe of stars is NOT vast. It’s just another component of God’s creation. Those awed by the immensity of space have foolishly abandoned the knowledge of God for speculation that turned into a lie. God is more immense than the heavens. God has a name for each of the stars! See v. 26. In Scripture, to give a name means to have authority over the one named, as parents have authority over their children. He knows *precisely* how many stars exist.

**“He brings princes to naught”** (v.23). The word used here is not *sar*, the usual Hebrew word for a prince. The word used here instead refers to those wicked supernatural beings that God created and were given authority over the gentile nations of earth. Whatever evil they cause, and they cause absolutely massive evil in our world, God has sovereign control of them and one day will judge them. God is in control of all history, of everything that happens. He is in control of all wickedness in His creation and will one day bring it to an end so that only His goodness exists.

**“Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord?’”** (v. 27). From here to the end of the chapter, God reassures His people, even those of the Northern Kingdom who’d already been taken into Exile, that He knows everything that’s happening to them and He’ll support them in their trials and enable them to endure, if only they remain faithful to Him and trust in His promises. That promise and the enablement is valid for us, too. May we always keep our minds fixed on God. There is no one else in all existence worthy of our continual awareness and love. The glory of God is displayed the greatest by a life that looks to the living, eternal God to know, love and serve Him.

Let’s think now about this chapter as a whole. What’s been explicit is God’s greatness vis-à-vis His power, His majesty, and His immensity. But there’s something else about God. Although it’s implicit and easily missed, it’s definitely here. And that is the greatness of His glory in His love and humility *in revealing Himself*. He didn’t need to give us this chapter, indeed, nor the Scriptures. Nor did He need to choose certain people to set His love on. But He did! God’s transcending glory is His beautiful Person. In infinite condescension and goodness, He loves His mortal and finite creatures so much that He reveals Himself so that we can be wonderfully blessed by our knowledge of Him. It’s the greatest knowledge anyone can have. Even *greater*, though, is to reflect on His glory in redeeming sin-laden creatures and taking them to Himself. That’s why we have to go from this extraordinary chapter into the N.T., which completes God’s self-revelation.