
Observations from Isaiah

LESSON XXXI : THE SERVANT'S LORD (40:1-31)

General outline (from Oswalt's *Isaiah*):

- I. INTRODUCTION: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF GOD'S PEOPLE (1-5)
- II. A CALL TO SERVANTHOOD (6)
- III. BASIS FOR SERVANTHOOD: WHOM SHALL WE TRUST? (7-39)
- IV. THE VOCATION OF SERVANTHOOD (40-55)
 - A. MOTIVE FOR SERVANTHOOD: GRACE (40-48)
 - 1. The Servant's Lord (40)
 - a. The Comforting Lord (40:1-11)
 - b. The Incomparable Lord (40:12-26)
 - (1) The Lord of Creation (40:12-20)
 - (2) The Lord over Creation (40:21-26)
 - c. The Dependable Lord (40:27-31)

The Unity of Isaiah

The fact that Isaiah wrote the entire book is critical to the message of chapter 40. Every commentary I considered discussed the liberal division of Isaiah into two (“*Deutero-Isaiah*”; and sometimes three, “*Trito-Isaiah*”) portions, each corresponding to a particular time period: Isa 1-39 relating to Jerusalem during 739-700 BC; Isa 40-55 relating to the Babylonian captivity, 586-535 BC; and Isa 56-66 relating to the returned captives, 520-500 BC. This position prevailed in the last of the 19th century, with scholarly refutations of that theory beginning in the 1970's. **Its foundation is the premise that God cannot predict the future nor providentially control human events; therefore the prophecy of God using Cyrus the Persian to restore Israel after the captivity could only have been written *after* the return has been accomplished (Isa 44:24-45:1).**

“Without doubt, the theme of chap 40-55 is the superiority of Israel's God over the idols of the nations as proved in three ways: His ability to explain the past (41:22), tell the future (41:23), and do things that are radically new (43:18,19). That is, He alone transcends the bounds of the cosmos. But ... the conviction that these chapters had to be written about 540 BC rests squarely on the prior conviction that Isaiah of Jerusalem could not have known the future in any supernatural way.” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] ***“A later prophet, speaking after Cyrus became news, would be no better than the priests of Marduk, who were only wise after the event when they claimed the conqueror's success in the name of their god. Only a prophecy with a veritable claim to have anticipated the event could be presented as proof of the sole deity of Yahweh.”*** [Motyor, *Isaiah*]

Of this biased approach Delitzsch writes, “We have already given a cursory glance at the general and particular grounds upon which we maintain the probability, or rather the certainty, that Isaiah was the author of ch. 40-66.... The words of Job to his friends (13:7,8) are quite as applicable to a biblical theologian of the present day.” [K&D, *Isaiah*] Thankfully the trend today is a conservative one: ***“Thus it seems safe to say that at the present time, the idea of several independent books of Isaiah is in the eclipse.”*** [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

*Will you speak wickedly on God's behalf?
Will you speak deceitfully for him?
Will you show him partiality?
Will you argue the case for God?
Would it turn out well if He examined you?
Could you deceive Him as you might deceive men? — Job 13:7-9*

The Composition of Isaiah 40-66

The first half of Isaiah consists of 7 parts, what some have called “sound-bites” from Isaiah’s sermons. The second part consists of 3 parts and is written considerably different. One commentator speculates ***Isa 1-39 were portions of his sermons but Isa 40-66 was written during persecuted times, when Isaiah was forbidden to preach but had time to write.*** Suggested divisions:

- 40-48, ending with 48:22 *“There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked”*
- 49-57, ending with 57:21 *“There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked”*
- 58-66, with the prophet dropping this form of refrain and declares the miserable end of the wicked in deeply pathetic though horrifying terms, 66:24 *“And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against Me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”*

The theme of the entire prophecy is ***the comfort of Jehovah for the remnant of God***, comparable to Jn 14-17 in the NT. Each section is a variation of the same theme, while each section has it’s own leading thought. E.g.:

- chap 40-48 contrasts Jehovah and idols, and between Israel and the heathen
- chap 49-57 contrasts the suffering of the Servant of Jehovah and His future glory
- chap 58-66 contrasts the hypocrites, depraved and rebellious in Israel with the faithful, mourning and persecuted remnant

The theme being comfort, Isa 40 therefore serves as an introductory chapter; not in the sense that it summarizes all that follows but rather it sets the stage. In so doing, it sets the tone (‘comfort My people’) and establishes two important themes (‘all flesh is grass’ and ‘who is like Me?’).

Background of Isaiah 40

In chap 39:1 we see ***Merodach-Baladan, king of Babylon*** 721-709 BC and again for a brief spell of nine months in 703 BC. Babylon had known years of greatness in the past and, though now eclipsed by Assyria, was to be great again. Merodach-Baladan’s brief success in throwing off the Assyrian yoke was an earnest of this.

There was, of course, a political motive for sending his deputation to Hezekiah. The envoys were taken on a grand tour of the palace and the kingdom. Hezekiah’s glad reception of them may have been due to a desire to be involved in concerted action against Assyria, and the display of his wealth would show he had something to offer as a potential ally. This of course was prideful and a failure to rely upon the Lord. Isaiah immediately reprimands this action and pronounces future captivity (39:6).

This pronouncement of judgement and captivity presents problems with Isaiah's previous prophecies. *If the days of the monarchy was numbered and all of Hezekiah's descendants would be eunuchs in Babylon's court, what would become of Isaiah's promises of Israel's future (e.g. 9:1-6; 11:1-16)? Either Isaiah tears up his former prophecies or he seeks further truth regarding the future.*

"This section is addressed chiefly to the Israelitish exiles in Babylon. The conservative critics regard this as one of the greatest marvels of predictive prophecy. As Isaiah had already announced the Babylonian exile in 39:6,7 he was further commissioned to provide comfort for those who should be tempted to despair by reason of their distress in captivity." [Carroll, *Interpretation of English Bible*]

"We emerge in 40:1 in a different world from Hezekiah's, immersed in the situation foretold in 39:5-8, which he was so thankful to escape. Nothing is said of the intervening century and a half; we wake, so to speak, on the far side of the disaster, impatient for the end of captivity." [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

The Comforting Lord (40:1-11)

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 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. A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall,

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 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. 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. 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: 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. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass

Comfort ye, comfort ye, My people, saith your God. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and call to her, That her warfare hath been completed, That accepted hath been her punishment, That she hath received from the hand of Jehovah Double for all her sins. A voice is crying — in a wilderness — Prepare ye the way of Jehovah, Make straight in a desert a highway to our God. Every valley is raised up, And every mountain and hill become low, And the crooked place hath become a plain, And the entangled places a valley. And revealed hath been the honour of Jehovah, And seen [it] have all flesh together, For the mouth of Jehovah hath spoken. A voice is saying, 'Call,' And he said, 'What do I call?' All flesh [is] grass, and all its goodliness [is] As a flower of the field: Withered hath grass, faded the flower, For the Spirit of Jehovah blew upon it, Surely the people [is]

but the word of our God stands forever.” You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!” See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. (NIV)

withereh, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young. (KJV)

grass; Withered hath grass, faded the flower, But a word of our God riseth for ever. On a high mountain get thee up, O Zion, Proclaiming tidings, Lift up with power thy voice, O Jerusalem, proclaiming tidings, Lift up, fear not, say to cities of Judah, ‘Lo, your God.’ Lo, the Lord Jehovah with strength cometh, And His arm is ruling for Him, Lo, His hire [is] with Him, and His wage before Him. As a shepherd His flock He feedeth, With His arm He gathereth lambs, And in His bosom He carrieth [them]: Suckling ones He leadeth. (YLT)

GENERAL CALL TO COMFORT THE REMNANT WITH THREE RESPONSES — the opening section lays the groundwork, beginning with a general call which sets the theme as no longer being judgement but restoration (v1,2). This call is answered by three unnamed voices: the restoration will be through the personal intervention of God (v3-5), no human force or condition can prevail against God’s promise (v6-8), and there is good news of divine might coupled with divine compassion (v9-11). *“If dramatic effect is desired, the opening words of this verse can hardly be surpassed. Without any transition or preparation, the repeated imperatives strike the hearer with sudden poignancy.”* [Oswalt, Isaiah] *“comfort, comfort”* — the verbs are plural imperatives (commands). *Who is addressed is not given, placing the emphasis upon the message rather than upon the messenger.* *“My people”* — although they had abandoned Him, the Lord had not rejected them. *“If we believe not, yet He abideth faithful: He cannot deny himself.”* (2 Tim 2:13) *“Speak comfortably, tenderly”* — lit. “speak to the heart” as a young man wooing his girl (Gen 34:3); someone bring reassurance (Ruth 2:13); a deserted husband seeking to win his wife back (Hos 2:14). *This loving tender voice is told to speak three words of comfort to His people, each suggesting completeness: service - fulfilled; iniquity - atoned for; sin - paid in full.*

“that her warfare is accomplished” (KJV); *“that her hard service has been complete”* (NIV) — originally a reference to an army or host; then extended its meaning to cover a fixed period of service or (as here) a fixed duration of hardship. The sense is Judah’s long period of hardship was fulfilled, i.e. the end of the Babylonian captivity.

“her iniquity pardoned” (KJV); *“her sin was been paid for”* (NIV) — God’s reconciled, her sins atoned for and He would punish her no longer. This brings the element of justice to comfort. *How can a holy God become a God of pardon? Not just by saying so — for this makes holiness negotiable and sin negligible.* Historically, God could forgive Judah because her sins had been punished by the captivity.

“she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins” — not twice as much as her sins deserved for that implies unfairness. Regardless of the exact meaning, the general emphasis is plain: ***she’s received “abundantly” for her iniquity and therefore may be assured punishment is past.*** The word literally means “to fold over, fold in half” and the sense might be one of several: (a) when something folded in half, each half exactly corresponds to the other therefore Israel had received the punishment exactly in proportion to her sin; (b) a hyperbole used to impress on the people that the chastisement of the exile was really over; (c) double in the sense of the exile lasting two generations; (d) one commentator suggests the possibility of the ancient tradesman pinning the folded account to the door of the customer once it was paid and this was called ‘the double’.

One commentator points out that ***it was not the power of Assyria or Babylon that brought about the exile; it was Israel’s relation to God’s moral law. Thus the comfort that God offers is not some sort of repayment for Israel’s unjust suffering. Rather it is the result of unmerited forgiveness. Israel has suffered immensely for her sins but now it is complete; she need fear nothing more from God’s hand.***

THE FIRST VOICE RESPONDS (v 3-5) — Historically the reference is to the return of the captives from Babylon, words of comfort to those in captivity. The picture given was not uncommon in the ancient Orient of one sent ahead of a coming king. An ancient Babylonian hymn illustrates this: “Make [Nabu’s] way good, renew his road. Make straight his path,” referring to the creation of special processional routes along which the images of gods were carried on festivals. Adam Clarke records a similar incident involving Semiramis marching into Media and Persia: “In her march to Ecbatana she came to the Zarcean mountain, which, extending many furlongs, and being full of craggy precipices and deep hollows, could not be passed without taking a great compass about. Being therefore desirous of leaving an everlasting memorial of herself, as well as of shortening the way, she ordered the precipices to be digged down, and the hollows to be filled up; and at a great expense she made a shorter and more expeditious road, which to this day is called from her the road of Semiramis. Afterward she went into Persia, and all the other countries of Asia subject to her dominion; and wherever she went, she ordered the mountains and precipices to be leveled, raised causeways in the plain country, and at a great expense made the ways passable.” [Clarke, *Commentary*] Several interpretations are possible, all of which makes good sense:

- ***the certainty of arrival*** — the roads were to be made straight, unmistakable (highway, or causeway), level and smooth. Nothing would hinder the coming of the King; or to Israel, the end of their captivity would surely come since God is King.
- ***the urgency of the return*** — some take the reference to the direct path through the desert to imply urgency. Babylon was at the south-eastern end of the Fertile Crescent, with the common path to Israel being along the Fertile Crescent. But in times of urgency, the quicker but more hazardous path straight across the desert was possible (it is recorded Nebuchadnezzar went directly across the desert from Egypt to Babylon upon hearing of his father’s death).
- ***the reminder of God’s character*** — unmistakably there is a reminder of God’s deliverance from Egypt during the exodus in which He led Israel personally through the desert.

“The glory of the Lord” speaks of the Lord in all His glory, not necessarily with awesome manifestations but in the fulness of His personal presence. ***“The cause for encouragement is solely the activity of the Lord, His coming into the sphere of human activity. Neither Israel nor any other human agency is the cause of the comfort here extended. It is the coming of God, the revelation of Him in human sight.”*** [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

THE SECOND VOICE RESPONDS (v6-8) — The first voice gave assurance of the coming deliverance; the second voice centers our thoughts upon the contrast between *the brevity of man and the eternity of God*, designed to affirm that *what the Lord promises He will surely keep*. As Isaiah spoke to Judah, surely their thoughts would be along the lines of “Those are fine words, but how can God deliver us from the great powers of the world?” Especially among those who would actually see Jerusalem besieged by the Babylonians — how can God deliver against a power such as they? Isaiah’s response was ***“Those great powers are as transient as the wild flowers!”*** “*The Spirit of the Lord*” or “*the breath of the Lord*” — either translation is acceptable. If “*wind, breath*” then it is a picture of God’s power, for the *hamsin*, a hot dry eastern wind likely in May, can turn a countryside from green to brown in less than 48 hours. If this is a direct reference to the Holy Spirit, it would also certainly apply because the Spirit is the Lord and Giver of life (Ps 104:30) and therefore equally the Lord and Giver of death. Isaiah adds “*surely* (lit. “*why, even*”) *the people*” — the Lord’s people! But ***the contrast is between man’s frailty and God’s unchanging, uncompromising Word. He promises deliverance and unlike man, Judah could depend upon His promises.***

THE THIRD VOICE RESPONDS (v9-11) — The third voice reveals *the promised coming of the Lord will not be in vain*. The exile is not the final word for the Lord’s people, whether in exile in Babylon or the continuing ‘exile’ of His scattered people (James 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1). The homecoming is certain. “*You who bring*” — a feminine verb pictures possibly *the celebrating company of singing women being led out of Jerusalem to meet the returning Victor-Shepherd*. OT illustrations of this is David’s victorious returns and Miriam singing praises upon the destruction of the Egyptians. “*High mountain*” so all can hear; “*with a shout*” because there is no reason to hesitate, no doubt about the message. “*Here is ... see ... see*” — same word used all three places: “*behold, look!*” ***The sense is it is happening before their very eyes!***

- ***Behold your God*** — the One we owe allegiance, our Master, our Sovereign
- ***Behold Jehovah God, the Sovereign LORD coming with power*** — again, assuring success for none can stay His hand from working out His will.
- ***Behold His reward is with Him*** — describing what He has ‘earned’ by His victory, the return of His people into the land.

But as the Lord returns with His people from captivity as spoils from battle, there is nothing ruthless about His power. The “*arm of might*” (v10) is the “*arm that cradle His people close to His heart*” (v11). He loves His people and though powerfully yet gently He will bring Israel back from the captivity.

APPLICATIONS

- **The principle of “double reference”** — We must remember this was not directly written for believers in 2001, 2700 years after the original writing! Isaiah wrote this first and foremost for his Jewish people which he just pronounced would be taken into judgmental captivity. Yet in the mysterious providence of God, while Isaiah originally meant this for his people, God intended it

for all His people of all ages, with obvious references to Christ and His coming for His people! ***I believe it good to recognize this principle in scripture, to attempt to be faithful to the primary import of a passage while also recognizing the spiritual fuller sense and applications.***

● **Chastisement is from the loving hand of God.** — *“For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth.”* (Heb 12:6) There are times when the Christian life might seem constricting as our flesh cries out for our old carnal ways. I remember coming home one evening when our dog was stretched at the end of his chain as he barked at one of our cats. The thought hit me: we chained our dog for his protection against the highway (we’re not so concerned with the welfare of our cats!). The “binding” of the Christian life is due to the loving-kindness of our Heavenly Father who only wants the best for His children.

● **God cannot and will not overlook sin.** — Historically Israel needed punished for her disobedience. Spiritually man must be punished for his sins, not by a “70-year captivity” but eternal separation from a holy God. How can God forgive man and remain holy? — only by the cross. *“Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”* (Ps 85:10)

● **Christians (and only Christians) have the full assurance of our sins being forgiven.** — As the word of comfort from Jehovah to Israel was one that assured the Jews God’s wrath had been satisfied, believers are assured God’s wrath against their sins has been satisfied by Christ, proven by His resurrection.

● **The deity of Christ in the mystery of the Trinity** — it would be negligent to not remark that Isaiah’s first voice called to “prepare the way for the LORD, Jehovah” (v3). This is picked up in the NT as a direct reference of Christ: *“And [John the Baptist] came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; as it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”* (Lk 3:3-6) John identified the Jehovah of the OT with Jesus of the NT, the salvation of God.

● **The necessity of repentance** — taking the message as applied by John the Baptist, we are commanded to spiritually *“make our paths straight”*, etc. ***John’s message as the fore-runner of Christ was one of repentance, turning from our sins and turning to God, removing all self-confidence, pride, hypocrisy, and irreligion which might stand in the way between us and Christ.***

● **The faithfulness and veracity of God** — ***what He has promised He will perform, in contrast to the promises of man.*** At times it is commendable to contemplate our individual responsibility before the Lord. By that I mean ultimately, stripping away all of life’s gifts (both good and bad), each of us answer individually to our Creator for the choices of our lives. This has both a positive and negative application. Negatively, excuses given here will have no bearing before an omniscient God. The lies stop, the self-deceit is wiped away, and any mask we wear during life will be removed. We *will* answer for our choices without casting blame on others. But positively, when life seems to be crumbling around us and the things we hold onto slip away, we can never lose our relationship with our God — what a comfort! ***Ultimately, regardless of how terrible things become during this life, everything will work out for the child of God.***

● **The believer’s peace is found in the Lord** — ***we are foolish to seek comfort outside of the Lord.*** While life does provide its comforts, we must recognize even these ***earthly comforts are***

providentially provided by the grace of God. E.g. one of my biggest comforts is my family — a child's hug can do wonders to a bad day! But some of the sources of comfort the world seeks are sinful: alcohol, drugs, self-pity, etc. At best these are temporary and often destructive; e.g. one Christian's testimony was that prior to his salvation while involved in drugs, he went to the fridge to find there was no food. His response was to get stoned. When he awoke, someone had stolen his fridge!

● **The Mary - Martha principle** — the third voice of comfort described the Lord as all-powerful who does as He pleases in heaven and earth, yet *the “arm” of the Lord is the “arm” which cuddles His people close to His bosom.* With this in mind, I must object to the common statement “Christians are saved to serve”. While recognizing the element of truth contained therein, I think it better to say “Christians are saved to love the Lord”. Granted, this love for the Lord brings forth service; yet do you see the difference in emphasis? The lost can “serve” the Lord; in fact, all lost people place the emphasis upon their works. But only one truly redeemed by Christ can love Him. So *while God does desire our service, He places the emphasis upon us spending time with Him in prayer and the word of God.* Then when age forbids one from physically serving the Lord, service through love, devotion and prayers for others may continue to grow.

● **The ‘God of all comfort’** — It would be impossible in a single message to adequately describe the Lord. Our thoughts in these few short verses have been on a single aspect: while God's holiness demands justice and judgement upon the lost (*“There is no peace, says the Lord, for the wicked”*) and while God is good to both the just and the unjust, He places a special upon those who are His own. He is our Shepherd, our Comforter, our peace. *‘Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort’* (2 Cor 1:3) *‘Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the LORD hath comforted His people, and will have mercy upon His afflicted.’* (Isa 49:13) *‘Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.’* (Matt 5:4) *‘The LORD is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.’* (Ps 23:1-4)

The Incomparable Lord: The Lord of Creation (40:12-20)

<i>Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the</i>	<i>Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him</i>	<i>Who hath measured in the hollow of his hand the waters? And the heavens by a span hath meted out, And comprehended in a measure the dust of the earth, And hath weighed in scales the mountains, And the hills in a balance? Who hath meted out the Spirit of Jehovah, And, [being] His counsellor, doth teach Him! With whom consulted He, That he causeth Him to understand? And</i>
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right way? *Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust. Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to? As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple.* (NIV)

knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing. And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering. All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him? The workman melteth a graven image, and the goldsmith spreadeth it over with gold, and casteth silver chains. He that is so impoverished that he hath no oblation chooseth a tree that will not rot; he seeketh unto him a cunning workman to prepare a graven image, that shall not be moved. (KJV)

teacheth Him in the path of judgment, And teacheth Him knowledge? And the way of understanding causeth Him to know? Lo, nations as a drop from a bucket, And as small dust of the balance, have been reckoned, Lo, isles as a small thing He taketh up. And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, Nor its beasts sufficient for a burnt-offering. All the nations [are] as nothing before Him, Less than nothing and emptiness, They have been reckoned to Him. And unto whom do ye liken God, And what likeness do ye compare to Him? The graven image poured out hath a artizan, And a refiner with gold spreadeth it over, And chains of silver he is refining. He who is poor [by] heave-offerings, A tree not rotten doth choose, A skilful artizan he seeketh for it, To establish a graven image — not moved. (YLT)

The question answered in the first section was ‘*Does the Lord want to deliver us?*’ Having that answered, Isaiah now turns to the second natural question: ‘*If God does want to deliver us, can He? It is one thing to desire to help, it is quite another to actually have the power to carry out one’s desires!*’

GOD IS UNIQUE IN THE UNIVERSE! (v12-14) — “It is interesting to compare the mighty questions here with those God put to Job in Job 38-41. In both places God asserts his sole godhood.” [Grogan, *Isaiah*] ***“This assertion implies several points that are at the heart of biblical religion: God is one, without any pantheon; he is the sole creator; he is beyond nature, not part of it.”*** [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] ‘*Who has understood the mind of the Lord?*’ – a good comparative verse could be ‘*All a man’s ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD.*’ (Prov 16:2) This speaks of the Lord’s mastery and understanding of the human spirit. The point being: ***if we cannot even take into measure the physical world, how can we take God’s measure?*** The *spirit* here is not the third Person of the trinity but neither is it merely the ‘mind’ (***as quoted in the NT, Rom 11:34; 1 Cor 2:16***) in the sense of intelligence. Rather it is the sum total of the interior life, our will, emotions and intellect. ‘*Who taught the Lord?*’ – If the plan of redemption came from an advisor or from a heavenly committee meeting, then the outcome of the plan is indeed dubious. But ***if the plan came from the heart of God, the outcome is sure and nothing can prevent its realization.***

GOD IS UNIQUE IN HISTORY! (v15-17) — Isaiah moves from rhetorical questions to flat assertion. Oswalt states *the Hebrew language used here denotes the thoughts of the nations are considered a consequence of the preceding ones concerning God's complete independence of His creation. "What are the nations — so impressive in their glory, and earthshaking in their power? They are the drop of water falling back into the cistern as the bucket is pulled up, the speck of dust on the pan of the balance scales that does not even cause the scales to flutter. Both are ephemeral and neither is cause for a moment's notice."* [Oswalt, Isaiah] *Lebanon* — this is an instance of the part standing for the whole. The smallness of Lebanon stands for the smallness of the whole world in comparison to the Lord. *God is so great that even the vast forests of Lebanon would not provide enough wood for the sacrifices He deserves, nor is there enough animals in the forest to provide such sacrifices!* 'The nations are nothing' — There is no comparison between earthly nations and the Lord. "This discontinuity does not speak of the worth of the nations in God's sight, however. *It is not that he thinks of them as nothing or considers them to be worthless. Many statements both in this book and elsewhere in the OT make clear that God does value the nations (e.g. 2:2-4; 11:10; 19:23-25; 25:6-8; Ps 8). It is simply that by comparison with the Lord (in the sense of in his presence), Assyria and its gods, Babylonia and its gods, Persia and its gods, fade into nothingness.*" [Oswalt, Isaiah]

HOW MAY SUCH A GOD BE REPRESENTED? (v18-20) — the Hebrew language here makes it clear that Isaiah is forming a conclusion. *"If God's transcendence is the most fundamental truth of OT theology, its immediate corollary is the next most fundamental: one cannot make an image of God. Any likeness of him that we contingent creatures attempt will of necessity be wrong. Furthermore, it plays directly into the hands of our passionate desire to make God controllable by making him part of our cosmos. Thus the OT throughout wages a never-ending battle against making images of God."* [Oswalt, Isaiah] In Isaiah's mind, the silliest likeness one might choose to image God was the idol. Here and three other places (41:6,7; 44:9-20; 46:5-7) uses the deepest sarcasm to show how foolish it is to make an idol. *"A wooden image, which is planed at the bottom, and made heavier below than above, to prevent its falling over with every shock, is to be a god! The thing carries its own satire, even when described with the greatest seriousness."* [K&D, Isaiah]

The Incomparable Lord: The Lord Over Creation (40:21-26)

<i>Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner</i>	<i>Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in: That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity. Yea, they shall not be planted; yea, they</i>	<i>Do ye not know — do ye not hear? Hath it not been declared from the first to you? Have ye not understood [From] the foundations of the earth? He who is sitting on the circle of the earth, And its inhabitants [are] as grasshoppers, He who is stretching out as a thin thing the heavens, And spreadeth them as a tent to dwell in. He who is making princes become nothing, Judges of earth as emptiness hath made; Yea,</i>
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are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. (NIV)

shall not be sown: yea, their stock shall not take root in the earth: and he shall also blow upon them, and they shall wither, and the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble. To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth. (KJV)

they have not been planted, Yea, they have not been sown, Yea, not taking root in the earth is their stock, And also He hath blown upon them, and they wither, And a whirlwind as stubble taketh them away. And unto whom do ye liken Me, And [am] I equal? saith the Holy One. Lift up on high your eyes, And see — who hath prepared these? He who is bringing out by number their host, To all of them by name He calleth, By abundance of strength (And [he is] strong in power) not one is lacking. (YLT)

This portion parallels v12-20 which begins with noting God’s transcendence over nature (v21,22) and history (v23,24), then gives an appeal to compare the Lord with creation; before with idols, here with the heavenly host (v25,26). “As in vv. 12-20, the insistence on the incomparability of God is absolute. When Isaiah finishes we have no doubt regarding his theology: *The Holy One is the sole ruler of heaven and earth. To think of comparing him to anything in creation is foolishness.*” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*]

AGAIN: GOD IS UNIQUE IN THE UNIVERSE! (v21, 22) — Isaiah asks rhetorical questions, sense being ‘*Will you not know? Can you not hear?*’ *It is not that the hearers did not know these things, it is whether they will give credence to what they already know! This reflects back on Isa 6:9,10: it is possible to hear yet refuse to hear. ‘He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth’* – it has been said historically that Christopher Columbus took these verses as proof of the fact the earth is a sphere and indeed, felt he was destined to journey to the West Indies to bear the name of Christ. His name itself means ‘*Christ-bearer*’.

AGAIN: GOD IS UNIQUE IN HISTORY! (v23, 24) — These weighty people whom someone has appointed has really been appointed to nothingness compared to the authority of God. They are but a brief unimportant moment in history, no sooner making an entrance into the stage of life before they are removed.

TO WHAT IS THE LORD COMPARED? — The Lord Himself speaks now, asking ‘*what can compare to Me?*’ Oswalt notes that the absence of the definite article before ‘*Holy One*’ denotes it is used as a personal name, not just a description. “‘*Holiness*’ *apparently describes the otherness of God, that which separates him from all his creatures. But this otherness is not merely in essence, as 5:16 and 57:15 show. He is other in character as well: morally perfect.*” [Oswalt, *Isaiah*] “This passage is antimythological; for it asserts that — far from being deities in their own right — the heavenly bodies are simply the creatures of the one Creator-God, who is also Israel’s Holy One. He orders their pattern, knows each in its distinctiveness and upholds them all in their being (v. 26; of Col 1:17; Heb 1:3). All this had, of course, been revealed to God’s people from early times (cf. v. 21) in the opening chapters of Genesis.” [Grogan, *Isaiah*]

The Dependable Lord (40:27-31)

Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God”? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (NIV)

Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint. (KJV)

Why sayest thou, O Jacob? and speakest thou, O Israel? ‘My way hath been hid from Jehovah, And from my God my judgment passeth over.’ Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard? The God of the age — Jehovah, Preparer of the ends of the earth, Is not wearied nor fatigued, There is no searching of His understanding. He is giving power to the weary, And to those not strong He increaseth might. Even youths are wearied and fatigued, And young men utterly stumble, But those expecting Jehovah pass [to] power, They raise up the pinion as eagles, They run and are not fatigued, They go on and do not faint! (YLT)

‘WHERE IS THE LORD WHEN I NEED HIM?’ — Isaiah brings this to a conclusion, asking the question that is common among those who suffer: *‘Why doesn’t God take action to right this situation?’ This would be the question of the Jews in Babylonian captivity, it would likewise be the question on millions of lips since the dawn of man. Only two reasons may be put forth for God’s apparent slowness: He does not wish to act (v1-11) or unable to act (v12-26). “Thus Isaiah seems to say, ‘In the light of what I have said, how can you believe God is ignoring you? Don’t you understand? God is utterly other than we. He does not work on our timetable, and he had none of our limitations. But he is at work and you can depend on him.’” [Oswalt, Isaiah]*

‘GOD IS TOO WISE TO MAKE MISTAKES AND TOO LOVING TO BE UNKIND’ — *“The point of the sentence is twofold, both elements being implications of the initial assertions: since their God, the Lord, is the eternal Creator, his strength is tireless and his wisdom is unfathomable. He can do whatever he wishes in his own time. Apparent delay never means either a lack of awareness or a lack of ability on his part.” [Oswalt, Isaiah]*

OUR PROBLEM: SUBMISSION TO HIS WILL! — I have thought of this frequently and in fact is a point of discomfort in my present circumstances. *Do we believe what Isaiah here is teaching? — those in this SS class would have to admit we have been taught the Lord is sovereign and can say ‘amen’ to Isaiah’s teachings here. What is our problem then? Must is not be a lack of a submissive spirit within us to allow His will to be supreme in our lives? Is that not why we’re disgruntled at times? We believe He hears and believe He can act — is not our problem in ‘waiting’ for the Lord? Is it not that at times as little children we stomp our feet at*

not being able to ‘get our own way’? It’s amazing that regardless of how long we’ve been believers, at times it seems we have such a long way to go in our Christian growth!

“To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? says the Holy One.”

— Isaiah 40:25 NIV