



Highlights From the Book of Isaiah

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Outline of the Book of Isaiah

I. Warning of Judgment on Israel (1-39)

II. The Promise of Future Hope in the New Jerusalem (40-66)

A. The Announcement of Hope (40-48)

1. God's Promised Deliverance (40:1-11)

2. The Incomparable Greatness of the Lord (40:12-31)

B. The Servant Fulfills God's Mission (49-55)

C. Everlasting Deliverance and Everlasting Judgment (56-66)

The Incomparable Greatness of the Lord (40:12-31)

- Israel's initial reaction to the great promises of God's deliverance given in the previous section (**Isaiah 40:1-11**) *may* well have been: "How is this possible? No nation has ever returned from a captivity and survived!"
- To *address* this concern, Isaiah to *now* directs the attention of the nation to the Lord *himself*.
- If they will keep in mind who the LORD *really is*, they will know *without a doubt* that the LORD truly *can* deliver them.
- It is with this in mind that the incomparable greatness of the LORD is now very emphatically set forth by the prophet.

The Incomparable Greatness of the Lord (40:12-31)

- The material in this section divides very nicely into *six* subsections.
- Today we will be looking at the *first three* subsections which run from **verses 12-20**:
 - The Greatness of the Lord Over the *World He Has Created* (40:12-14)
 - The Greatness of the Lord Over the *Nations of the Earth* (40:15-17)
 - The Greatness of the Lord in Contrast to *Vain Idols* (40:18-20)

The Greatness of the Lord Over the World He Has Created (40:12-14)

40:12 Who has measured out the waters in the hollow of his hand, or carefully measured the sky, or carefully weighed the soil of the earth, or weighed the mountains in a balance, or the hills on scales? ¹³ Who comprehends the mind of the LORD, or gives him instruction as his counselor? ¹⁴ From whom does he receive directions? Who teaches him the correct way to do things, or imparts knowledge to him, or instructs him in skillful design?

40:12 *Who has measured out the waters in the hollow of his hand, or carefully measured the sky, or carefully weighed the soil of the earth, or weighed the mountains in a balance, or the hills on scales?*

- Isaiah's presentation at this point of consists of a number of rhetorical questions.
- These questions are ***not*** asked in a ***confrontational*** manner.
- Rather, these questions are designed to ***stir up faith*** by reminding Isaiah's Jewish audience what they ***already know*** to be true.
- This can also be seen by the number of times Isaiah alludes in the remainder of this chapter to the creation account and the various psalms found in the OT.
- But in spite of their familiarity with such Biblical truths, the people's core beliefs were not having the impact that they should have had on their attitudes and their lives: the word had become ineffective and dead.

40:12 *Who has measured out the waters in the **hollow of his hand**, or carefully measured the sky, or carefully weighed the soil of the earth, or weighed the mountains in a balance, or the hills on scales?*

- By this series of questions, Isaiah seeks to draw the people into a **renewed appreciation** of who the LORD really is, while at the same time dismissing as **insignificant** anything that might cause people to have **doubts** about God.
- The full answer to each of these rhetorical questions is, “No one except the LORD himself.”
- The grandeur of creation is beyond the ability of **any human being** to measure, but it is **not** beyond the ability of its Creator (cf. Job 38; Ps 104:1-9).
- For example, even in modern times, “*Only slightly more than 23% of the seafloor has been mapped in great detail*” (<https://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explainers/mapping.html>)
- But it’s a small thing for the **LORD** to assess its size, because the vast waters of the ocean could, figuratively speaking, be cupped in the “**hollow of his hand**”.

40:12 *Who has measured out the waters in the hollow of his hand, or carefully measured the sky, or carefully weighed the soil of the earth, or weighed the mountains in a balance, or the hills on scales?*

- It would be an impossible task for **any** human being, even in modern times, to calculate the vastness of the heavens: *“Among the scientific community, it’s widely believed that so far humans have only discovered about 5% of the universe.”*
(<https://www.visualcapitalist.com/cp/map-of-the-entire-known-universe/>)
- But its Maker knows no such limitations.
- The measures commonly used by mankind, whether of volume, distance or weight, are all **hopelessly inadequate** for computing the vastness of the universe.
- What pair of scales could be used for such a purpose?

40:13 *Who comprehends the mind of the LORD, or gives him instruction as **his counselor**?*

- The focus now changes from the omnipotence of the LORD as the *divine craftsman* to his infinite wisdom as the *divine planner*.
- The surrounding nations in Isaiah's day embraced beliefs in a *council* of the gods being involved in creating the universe, but biblical testimony uncompromisingly teaches that it is the work of God *alone*.
- There is no one capable of giving a comprehensive evaluation of all the intricate work that he has done.
- No individual has sufficient insight into the LORD's purposes to be "*his counselor*", a person of great wisdom who is able to function as a royal adviser.
- The LORD has no need of advice before he acts, and no one is competent to give it.

40:14 *From whom does he receive directions? Who teaches him the correct way to do things, or imparts **knowledge** to him, or instructs him in **skillful design**?*

- The questions are further piled up to show man's **utter incapacity** and God's unlimited ability.
- The LORD always deals with men as they fully deserve.
- "**knowledge**" and "**skillful design**" are mentioned last as qualities which he also possesses.
- The LORD never stands in need of having anybody provide him with needed facts.
- He alone sees through things and is able to judge impartially on the basis of the full knowledge of all facts.
- So looking around at the world that came from the Creator's hands, there is **no question** that the LORD is able to regulate **all** that happens in it, including the destiny of Israel.

The Greatness of the Lord Over the Nations of the Earth (40:15-17)

40:15 Look, the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales. He lifts the coastlands as if they were dust. ¹⁶ Not even Lebanon could supply enough firewood for a sacrifice; its wild animals would not provide enough burnt offerings. ¹⁷ All the nations are insignificant before him; they are regarded as absolutely nothing.

40:15 *Look, **the nations** are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales. He lifts the coastlands as if they were dust.*

- The area of investigation to determine the power of the Almighty shifts from nature to “*the nations*”.
- This verse does not mean that God doesn’t care about or value the nations. The LORD obviously cares a great about the nations.
- The point being made here is that if we were to measure the importance of the nations over and against the importance of God, the nations would count for nothing *by comparison*.
- In the forefront of Isaiah’s mind in *this* context, though it not specifically mentioned, is the nation of Babylon – the power that *could* attempt to resist the Lord’s efforts to free his people from Captivity.

40:15 *Look, the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales. He lifts the coastlands as if they were dust.*

- The illustrations that Isaiah uses here to show the insignificance of “*the nations*” in comparison to God are quite striking.
- In comparison to God, the nations amount to no more in his sight than does a mere “*drop*” running down the side of a “*bucket*” as a man draws water from a well.
- Or they could be likened to the light “*dust*” that has accumulated on a merchant’s “*scales*”, which he lightly blows away before he starts weighing.
- The LORD could, if he wished to do so, even lift up “*the coastlands*” in the way that a man picks up a bit of “*dust*”.
- The “*coastlands*” include all the far-distant areas around the Mediterranean Sea, however remote they may be.

40:16 Not even **Lebanon** could supply enough **firewood** for a sacrifice; its **wild animals** would not provide enough **burnt offerings**.

- God is so great that even the vast cedar forests of “**Lebanon**” could not provide enough “**firewood**” for the kinds of sacrifices he deserves.¹
- Nor could the abundant “**wild animals**” living in those forests provide enough “**burnt offerings**”.¹
- Yet before he ends this book, Isaiah will have described, in chapter 53, a sacrifice that *is* worthy of God.²

¹ Oswalt, John N.. *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66 (The NIC on the OT)* (p. 61). Eerdmans.

² Motyer, J. Alec. *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (p. 304)

40:17 *All the nations are insignificant before him; they are regarded as absolutely nothing.*

- Coming back to the point that he made earlier – how the nations rank in the sight of the majestic Lord of all – Isaiah offers a few more hyperboles:
- The nations are “*insignificant before him; they are regarded as **absolutely nothing.***”
- Again, he is not speaking here of the **value** of the human beings (i.e. divine image bearers) that make up “*the nations*”.
- What he is talking about here is the potential **strength and importance** of “*the nations*” when contrasted with the God of Israel.

The Greatness of the Lord in Contrast to Vain Idols (40:18-20)

40:18 To whom can you compare God? To what image can you liken him? ¹⁹ A craftsman casts an idol; a metalsmith overlays it with gold and forges silver chains for it. ²⁰ To make a contribution one selects wood that will not rot; he then seeks a skilled craftsman to make an idol that will not fall over.

40:18 *To whom can you compare God? To what image can you liken him?*

- Looking about him for further comparisons of powers that are ranked as great, Isaiah comes to an area where the ***whole world*** of that time thought that the ***greatest*** powers were to be found – the field of idols.
- This section contrasts the omnipotence of God with the idols that men of that day worshipped.
- Isaiah has quite a bit more to say about idols in the remaining chapters of this book (see Isaiah 41:6ff; 44:9-17; 45:16; 46:5-7).
- What we have here is a practical exposition of the commandment: “*You shall not make for yourself a carved image*” (Exod 20:4).
- It is as though the author said: There simply is ***no being*** that can in any way even ***remotely*** compete with God, or even be “likened” to him.

40:19 *A craftsman casts an idol; a **metalsmith overlays** it with gold and forges silver chains for it.*

- Take any idol – it is the work of a craftsman who cast it.
- Here it is not a case of God making man, but of one of man making a god.
- Isaiah here gives a description of the process involved in making an idol.
- An idol made of *solid* gold would be both too heavy and too expensive.
- So, the craftsman constructs a basic structure which he then gives to a “*metalsmith*” who “*overlays*” it with gold-plating.

40:19 *A craftsman casts an idol; a metalsmith overlays it with gold and forges silver chains for it.*

- The “*silver chains*” mentioned are very likely only ornamentations.
- Though they were often used to hold the image in place so that it wouldn’t topple over.
- The product in any case is a manufactured god.
- If someone were to argue that the heathen knew the difference between the gods and the idols that represented these gods, it has been noted time and again that, in practice, this distinction fell away and the common worshipper regarded the image as though it *were* the god.

40:20 *To make a contribution one selects **wood that will not rot**; he then seeks a **skilled craftsman** to make an idol that will not **fall over**.*

- Here we see described a **worshipper** of a god, who wants to make an image of his god but lacks the means for a more expensive production.
- So he chooses a suitable piece of “**wood that will not rot**”.
- He then engages a “**skilled craftsman**” to do the job, so that the image will not appear **unworthy** of the god whom it represents.
- Besides, it took some skill to prepare an image that wouldn't just “**fall over**”.
- Isaiah has said enough here to make his point.
- He will come back to the topic of idols later in the book.

New Testament
Citations of
Isaiah 40:13

The Apostle Paul's
Use of
Isaiah 40:13 in
Romans 11:34-35

Isaiah 40:13 *Who comprehends the mind of the LORD, or gives him instruction as his counselor? (NET)*

Rom 11:33 *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how unfathomable his ways! ³⁴ For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? ³⁵ Or who has first given to God that God needs to repay him? ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever! Amen. (NET)*

Isaiah 40:13 *Who comprehends the mind of the LORD, or gives him instruction as his counselor?*

³⁴ *For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?*

- The Apostle Paul cites **Isaiah 40:3** in **Rom 11:33-36**, a section of the book of Romans where he appropriately concludes one of his most profound and difficult theological discussions with a hymn in praise of God for his purposes and plans.
- In **verse 33** the hymn begins with threefold praise of God's "*riches and wisdom and knowledge*".
- In **verses 34-35** he asks **three** rhetorical questions that emphasize human inability to understand God's ways – of which the **first two** questions are from **Isaiah 40:3** (the **third** is from **Job 41:3**).
- **Verse 36** concludes with a final doxology which declares the ultimacy of God.

Isaiah 40:13 *Who comprehends the mind of the LORD, or gives him instruction as his counselor?*

³⁴ *For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?*

- The two rhetorical questions cited from **Isaiah 40:13** enhance this doxological confession by bringing to mind the original context where Isaiah draws a sharp contrast between the Lord and all of his creation.
- **No one** has “*known the mind of the Lord, or... has been his counselor*”.
- As Creator, he acts **alone** and **uniquely** (Isaiah 40:18).
- Therefore, his judgments and ways are inscrutable.
- Any human attempt to reduce the ways of God to knowledge that we can manage and comprehend is a violation of God’s right as Creator.

The Apostle Paul's
Use of
Isaiah 40:13 in
1 Cor 2:16

Isaiah 40:13 *Who comprehends the mind of the LORD, or gives him instruction as his counselor? (NET)*

1 Cor 2:14 *The unbeliever does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The one who is spiritual discerns all things, yet he himself is understood by no one. ¹⁶ For who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to advise him? But we have the mind of Christ. (NET)*

Isaiah 40:13 *Who comprehends the mind of the LORD, or gives him instruction as his counselor?*

1 Cor 2:16 *For who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to advise him? But we have the mind of Christ.*

- The Apostle Paul cites **Isaiah 40:3** in **1 Cor 2:16**, a section of the book where he is taking the Corinthians to task for their infatuation with worldly philosophy and wisdom.
- Paul starts his argument all the way back in 1 Cor 1:18 where he begins by reminding them that *“the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”*
- He then goes on to show that Greeks, like the Jews, **reject** the cross of Christ: *“For Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks ask for wisdom”* (1 Cor 1:22)

Isaiah 40:13 *Who comprehends the mind of the LORD, or gives him instruction as his counselor?*

1 Cor 2:16 *For who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to advise him? But we have the mind of Christ.*

- He then reminds them that when he first came to them, he did **not** come with words taught by worldly “*human wisdom, but with those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people*” (1 Cor 2:13)
- The philosophers of Greece and the scribes among the Jews had sat in judgment of Paul, and pronounced his preaching foolishness.
- But **they** are not competent judges: “*The unbeliever does not receive the things of the Spirit of God... and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (1 Cor 2:14)

Isaiah 40:13 *Who comprehends the mind of the LORD, or gives him instruction as his counselor?*

1 Cor 2:16 *For who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to advise him? But we have the mind of Christ.*

- Paul then states: *“The one who is spiritual discerns all things yet he himself is understood by no one”* (1Cor 2:15)
- The *“all things”* here are limited by the context to the things of the Spirit.
- So in other words, the point Paul is making here is that *“one who is spiritual”* (i.e. a believer) is able to discern the things which can only be discerned spiritually, and yet he himself is not properly appreciated or valued by *“the unbeliever”*.

Isaiah 40:13 *Who comprehends the mind of the LORD, or gives him instruction as his counselor?*

1 Cor 2:16 *For who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to advise him? But we have the mind of Christ.*

- Paul then gives Biblical **support** for this idea by citing **Isaiah 40:3**: *For who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to advise him? But we have the mind of Christ.*
- So, Paul's argument here goes like this:
 - Isaiah 40:3 asks a rhetorical question: "*who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to advise him?*"
 - Answer: "No one!"
 - *But we [believers] have the mind of Christ [i.e., the Lord].*
 - Therefore no one can instruct or judge us – that is to say, because unbelievers have **not** been given spiritual discernment by the Spirit of Christ, they are not in a position to properly understand or appreciate the things we as believers have received from Christ.

Next Time

I plan to look at the remaining verses that describe “The Incomparable Greatness of the Lord” in **Isaiah 40:12–31**

- In Contrast to the ***Mighty of This Earth*** (40:21–24)
- God’s ***Masterful Control of the Stars*** (40:25–27)
- The Lord, the ***Source of All Power*** (40:28–31)

Class Discussion Time



Class Discussion Time

- We saw today that, in spite of their familiarity with Biblical truths, the people of Israel's core beliefs were not having the impact that they should have had on their attitudes and their lives: the word had become ineffective and dead.
- Have you seen this happen in the lives of modern professing Christians?
- Isaiah's attempt to remedy this problem in his day was to remind the people of who God really is.
- What would it look like for us to do this in our day?

Class Discussion Time

- In Isaiah's day the *whole world* of that time thought that the greatest powers of all were to be found in the gods of the nations as represented by idols.
- Most of the people in our day are too "sophisticated" to bow down before a statue or idol.
- Nevertheless, I would argue that idolatry is alive and well in our day.
- What do you see as being some of the biggest idols of our day?