

The Doctrine of God: The Anchor of All Faith and Strength

The Gospel According to Isaiah

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Bible Text: Isaiah 40:12-20

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I knew I would preach in Isaiah 40 one day. I never realized I would take the first 39 chapters to get to it.

This passage is absolutely mind boggling. There is something about Isaiah 40 that has caught the attention not only of expositors, but theologians. I was reading today in J Gresham Machen's book *God Transcendent* and he was noting how Isaiah 40 is one of the most beautiful—in the King James—the most beautiful sections of prose in all English literature. And, in fact, it is something that just captures your attention. And so we get to this passage tonight and, Lord willing, we will cover verses 12 through 20. But it comes to us after these first 11 verses. And I would remind you that the first 11 verses deal with the three fold comfort that is given to Zion.

And we really have a transition now from the first 11 verses now to verses 12 through 30 and the transition is between the final word of comfort, "Behold your God,"¹ and then an unfolding of the character of God that is really unparalleled in all of Scripture.

The theme from 12 to 31 is going to be the greatness of God. Now I would suggest to you that in the first 11 verses of chapter 40 that there is a question that is underlying this section of Isaiah and the question basically is this coming from God's people. Now that we are in the misery of captivity—remember Isaiah is prophesying to a people yet to be afflicted—now that we are in this misery, the misery of the Babylonian captivity, will God deliver us from the hand of our powerful oppressor? In this case Babylon, but ultimately the oppression of sin and the devil himself.

And the answer that God gives to his people in verses one through 11 is that I will bring you comfort. I will bring you comfort through the gospel itself. I will work a work of deliverance because my heart is for you. There is a tenderness in those first 11 verses of God to an afflicted people that is unparalleled.

But then the next question that would come to mind. If you were a Jew in Babylon under

¹ Isaiah 40:9.

the oppression of Nebuchadnezzar and once you knew that God's desire was to give you comfort and deliverance, the next question would be: Does God really have the power to deliver us from a mighty oppressor like Babylon?

You see, it is one thing to say that God has the desire to deliver his people, to bring them comfort and to do good to them, but it is another thing to say that God has the power and the ability to do it. Is this not really one of the major areas of tension that we face today? I mean remember rabbi Harold Kushner *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* and his conclusion is based on that perennial question, if God is good and all powerful, why do bad things happen to his people? Because it would seem to us that if God was good and all powerful he would do what? He would prevent bad things from happening. And, of course, Kushner's very unsatisfactory, very unbiblical, in fact, very blasphemous response to the question of why does God allow bad things to happen is his heart is with you, he wants to do you good, but in the final analysis, he just doesn't have the power to do it. And so for Kushner it is more comforting to know that God would really want to do good to us, but he just can't than to say that God has the power and he won't.

And so the question is very obvious. When God's people are being oppressed and we know his heart's desire towards us is for deliverance and comfort and peace, then the next obvious question is: Does he have the power to pull it off? And what we are going to see in verses 12 through 31 is a resounding yes. He has power that you wouldn't believe. In fact what you end up having in verses 12 through 31 is that God has more power, more knowledge, more wisdom than you could ever imagine and the things that he has promised he is able to back up with an incomprehensible, infinite power and wisdom and might that goes beyond anything any human being has ever even perceived.

And that is the word of comfort that comes to us. God is going to deliver. God is going to stay. God is going to take people into his arms. And guess what? He has the power to do it without reservation.

Jerry Bridges in his book *The Joy of Fearing God* says, "Isaiah 40 reminds us that God is far, far greater than anything we can imagine. He is not limited to our most creative ideas. There can be no comparison between God, infinite, eternal, self sufficient and man, any man, for we are all only creatures, finite, limited and mortal. If we are to fear God, the infinitely vast distance between God and ourselves must ever be kept in mind and Isaiah 40 will help us keep this perspective."

And so Isaiah 40 stands as a monument in God's holy Word as one of those passages that reminds us—and here is the word that I want us to take home tonight—that God is transcendent. He is far above us.

Now the glory of Isaiah chapter 40 is that not only is God transcendent, far above us, infinitely far above us, he is also the God who has said that he is the shepherd who will gather us in his arms which means he is immanent, that is, close by us.

You understand that it is only Christianity that has a God who is both transcendent and immanent. Take, for instance, the religions of the world.

Take Islam, for example. Allah is not an immanent god who is close at hand. He is very transcendent, but he is not close to his people.

Take, for instance, some of the eastern religions and their ideas of god or gods, very transcendent, far above us, but certainly not near us.

Take, for instance the idea of New Age. Well, the New Age god is very immanent because you is him. Ok? And so in the New Age you have a very immanent god because all is god and god is all.

But then stop for a minute and think of the god of popular culture, the god of Bette Midler. He is out there where? At a distance watching us. He is very high and lofty, but he certainly is not going to take time of the likes of us. He might peak in once in a while. This is the god of Deism.

And it is only the God of the Bible who is absolutely transcendent, far, infinitely far above his creatures, far, far greater so than anything we could ever imagine even in our most creative and fertile moments, but yet very near to us. And so the great God is in the midst of his people. The transcendent God is in our midst. And it is a glorious thing.

Now the application of the scene of Isaiah 40 is that this great God, this transcendent God is going to be the source of all true faith, comfort and strength and God is going to act. And when he acts it is going to be with power and might and you had better be ready and in the meantime wait on the Lord. That is about what it is to live the Christian life. Be ready and wait.

Now we get to verse 12, a series of rhetorical questions.

“Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, And marked off the heavens by the span, And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, And weighed the mountains in a balance, And the hills in a pair of scales?”²

What we have in verses 12 through 17 starting with these rhetorical questions is a statement on the greatness of God.

I went over to Lampe Park today and read a few commentaries while I would look up at the mountains every once in a while. And then when I was done reading the commentaries I walked around Lampe Park with my eyes just kind of fixed on those majestic mountains that God has privileged us to live by. And do you know what I did the whole way around? I sang *How Great Thou Art* all the way around Lampe Park, because there is something within us that this passage resonates with. God is so great and glorious that it goes beyond anything we can imagine. In fact, what we get from this

² Isaiah 40:12.

passage really are the doctrines of transcendence and also incomprehensibility. And the word means exactly what it sounds like it means. Incomprehensibility.

Zack came home a number of weeks ago and they are learning the attributes of God with some wonderful, glorious, God centered curriculum. I said, “Zack, what did you learn about God tonight?”

“I learned that God is incomprehensible.”

“So what does that mean?”

“I can’t figure him out.”

What a great truth. You and I need to come to grips with the fact that if you can figure God out, then the god that you have figured out is not worthy of your worship.

There needs to be the *mysterium tremendum*, the awful mystery. This God is infinite. This God is eternal. This God is incomprehensible and you and I have not even scratched the tip of the exposed iceberg about this God.

Now these questions. Yes. This chapter is going to tell us all about what God is like and on your notes I have the famous question, what is God, from the Shorter Catechism.

God is a spirit infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth. And I think that what you will find is that every one of those statements in the Shorter Catechism is undergirded in undergirded in Isaiah chapter 40.

We see in verse 12 God’s transcendence over nature itself. The first thing it says is, “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand?”³

Now let me just say a very quick word before we think about this, about anthropomorphic language—*ανθρωπος* (anth’-ro-pos), man, *μορφη* (mor-fay’), form. The Bible often uses anthropomorphic language, language that attributes the form of a human being to God.

Now we are not Mormons and we don’t think that God has a body. In fact, the catechism says God is a spirit. Where do they get that from? John 4:24. “God is Spirit.”⁴

So we teach our kids in the little kid’s catechism, “What is God? God is Spirit. He doesn’t have a body like men.”

But here we have an infinite, incomprehensible God. And if you are going to have an infinite, incomprehensible God how in the world are you ever going to explain any part of that infinite, incomprehensible God to people like us who are what? Finite and limited.

³ Ibid.

⁴ John 4:24.

Well, you have to go from the known to the unknown. That is how we learn, right? And so we understand things like hands and eyes and feet. God doesn't have hands. God doesn't have eyes. God doesn't have wings.

By the way, when hey want to... when... whether it is a Mormon or whoever wants to press the passages that speak about God having the form of eyes or hands what do you do with the psalms that tell us that he shelters us under the shadow of his wing? Now he is a bird man. And it gets more and more ridiculous as you go on.

And so we need to understand what is happening in Isaiah is Isaiah is taking language that we can understand—things like the hollow of your hand—using it to explain to us that which is incomprehensible.

Now this statement, “Who has measured the waters...”⁵ The plural, very important, all of the waters, all of the waters of the earth, all the seas of the earth. “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand?”⁶

Well, the implied answer is: Nobody but God, right?

Now stop and think about it. It is not cupping your hand. It is holding you hand like this and that little tiny space right here.

Hold your hand out like that and look at that little tiny... In the palm of your hand there is a little tiny space. That is the hollow of your hand.

Now how much water can you hold in the hollow of your hand? Maybe a tablespoon, maybe two if you have an exceptionally big hollow.

Now, how many hollow fulls would it take for you to fill up your bathtub? You would be doing that for a while, don't you think? You go over to the sink and let it drip in and go. I mean, how long would that take you? I mean, it would take you quite a while, right?

Ok. So now you are going to... you have filled up the bathtub. Now you are going to fill up the swimming pool. And then you are going to fill up Lake Tahoe and then the Mediterranean Sea and then the Atlantic Ocean... And do you see the image we have here?

God himself can measure all the waters of the earth in the hollow of his hand. That is unfathomable. And that is the point. It is not as if God wants us to figure out the mass of how much water is in the earth and so we can determine how big the hollow of God's hand is. The idea is that this God is so immense and so vast that there is absolutely no way for us to fathom his greatness.

⁵ Isaiah 40:12.

⁶ Ibid.

The next question. “Who has measured the heavens by the span of His hand?”

Now the span would be ancient near eastern measurement where you take your hand and extend your fingers and the span would be from the point of your little finger to the point of your thumb, roughly maybe five, six inches.

Isaiah said, “Who in the world but God is able to measure the heavens, plural, by the span of his hand?”

Now stop and think about this. Scientists know that light travels at the speed of 5.87 trillion miles a year. They also know that the galaxy of which our solar system is a part is about 100,000 light years in diameter, about 587,000 trillion miles.

By the way, those are just numbers on a page. There is just no way you can even begin to comprehend even one trillion miles let alone 587,000 trillion miles.

It is one of about a million such galaxies in the optical range of our most powerful telescopes. In our galaxy there are about 100 billion stars. The star is one of them, a modest star burning at about 6000 degrees centigrade on the surface and traveling in an orbit of 155 miles per second which means it will take about 200 million years to complete a revolution around the galaxy.

Now does it sound like an understatement to say to you that that is pretty big?

Isaiah says God is going to measure it if he just opens his hand. He says that is about a span.

This is amazing.

And then the next statement. “Who has calculated the dust by the measure?”

Now the NIV actually begins to capture this a little better than the NAS. “Who has measured the depths of the earth in a basket.”

Now the word for “basket” is a Hebrew term that is a small carrying basket that would be equivalent to our quart, about a quarter of a gallon. And so here is God and here is the picture, the anthropomorphic language Isaiah wants us to understand. Here is God and he takes this little quart basket and he takes all the dirt of the earth and puts it in his basket.

So I know a geologist that works across the hall from me and I said, “Can you figure out the amount of dirt in the world and this on earth, the earth’s dirt mass?”

Now listen to this. He had to figure it out, look up in a few books. He didn’t have it off the top of his head. But I wasn’t disappointed because I have it right here.

Now just listen to this. We are talking in tons, all right? Tons. 1.04 times 10 to the 25th

power. (1×10^{25}). That is a lot of dirt. That is just a lot of mass, isn't it? And here is the image that Isaiah puts in front of us. God goes and scoops up the dirt and puts it in his little basket. Incomprehensible?

The mountains and the hills are weighed in his balance, in his scale.

You stop and think about all of the mountain ranges of the world and it says God just sort of picks them up and puts them on his scale. The image that we get in verse 12 alone is that God who is infinite and transcendent and has so much more power than anybody could ever imagine... In our wildest dreams we cannot imagine how awesome and great God is. There is a sense in what... this is what God has given us to tell us about himself, 66 books written over a period of 1000 years. This is it. The infinite, eternal, incomprehensible God has revealed himself in a book that is shorter than *War and Peace*.

So what we know about God is infinitesimally small compared to what he really is. And everything we know about him in this book is accurate and true. But do you understand that if you were to picture an iceberg and here is what God has revealed, the tip of the iceberg that emerges out of the water and, of course, it goes down for miles and miles. You don't even know how big it is. No way to tell. And here is the little tip of the iceberg coming up out of the water and do you know what we have done? Here is the tip of the iceberg right here. Do you know what we have done? We have scratched the tip of the iceberg. We have scratched the tip of the tip of the iceberg.

Who among us, even if you had 10 life times, could plumb the depth of what God has revealed, let alone what he hasn't revealed?

Are you starting to feel some of the weight of the greatness of God?

A W Tozer in one of my favorite books, my favorite book by Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* has these words to say about God's infinitude.

“When we say that God is infinite we mean that he knows no bounds. Whatever God is and all that God is he is without limit. And here, again, we must break away from the popular meaning of words. Unlimited wealth, boundless energy are further examples of the misuse of words. Of course, no wealth is unlimited and no energy boundless unless we are speaking of the wealth and energy of God. Again, to say that God is infinite is to say that he is measureless. Measurement is a way God created things. Measurement is the way created things have of accounting for themselves. It describes limitations, imperfections and cannot apply to God. Weight describes the gravitational pull of the earth upon material bodies. Distance describes intervals between bodies in space. Length means extension in space. And there are other familiar measurements such as those for liquid, energy, sound, light and numbers for pluralities. We also try to measure abstract qualities and speak of great and little faith, high or low intelligence, large or meager talents. It is not plain that all of this... Is it not plain that all of this does not and cannot in any way apply to God? It is the way that we see the work of his hands, but not the way we see him. He is above all of this, outside of it and beyond it. Our concept of

measurements embrace mountains and men, atoms and stars, gravity, energy, numbers, speed, but never God. We cannot speak of measure or amount of size or weight and at the same time be speaking of God. For these things tell us degrees and in God there are no degrees. All that he is he is without growth or addition or development. Nothing in God is less or more or large or small. He is what he is in himself without qualifying thought or word. He is simply God.”

If you don't get the feel of that from these questions in verse 12, then you need to go back and ponder the greatness of God depicted through these questions.

Verses 13 and 14 continue the questions.

Who has directed the Spirit of the [Yahweh], Or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge, And informed Him of the way of understanding?⁷

In verse 12 we see God's transcendence over nature. In verses 13 and 14 we see God's transcendence over all knowledge. We see a series of questions.

Who has directed the Spirit of the [Yahweh], Or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge, And informed Him of the way of understanding?⁸

And, of course, the answer is: nobody.

When we get to verses 13 and 14 we begin to see the God of infinite intelligence, the God of infinite knowledge, the God who... And we use theological words to try to depict what we are talking about here. We talk about omniscience. *Omni*, all, *scientia* knowledge, all knowing.

We talk about omnisapiece, all wisdom. The God of the Bible is described to us in terms of being one who knows all things and possesses all wisdom.

Well, isn't it good question to ask: What does God really know?

If you have A A Hodge's little—it is not so little—but his book on theology *Outlines of Theology* he has a wonderful six or seven pages on divine intelligence. It is absolutely wonderful.

But what does God know? Now traditionally Jews and Christians have acknowledged and affirmed that God knows all things actual and possible and potential, all things past, present and future.

⁷ Isaiah 40:13-14.

⁸ Ibid.

When we get to chapter 41 and Isaiah begins to mock the idols we will take some time to look at a movement that is gaining steam in our day called Free Will Theism which says that God doesn't really know all things. Held by evangelicals or supposedly evangelicals. We will look at that later. But let me just read this to you from Robert Raymond.

He says, "The all wise God is at every moment cognizant of everything that ever was, now is or ever shall be. It has never been otherwise. He necessarily knows himself exhaustively and he necessarily knows his creation exhaustively and both instantaneously, simultaneously and everlastingly. His knowledge of himself and of all other things is absolutely comprehensive and eternally intuitive. That is, he has never learned anything because he has always known everything. He never receives from some other source or from his inventive genius an idea that he never previously had."

Stop to think about that for a minute. God never has any new ideas. Boring? Not if you are God. God's knowledge is coextensive with all that is. All created things fall within the compass of God's knowledge, indeed, are what they are by virtue of God's knowledge and pre determinate counsel.

And then listen to this sentence. "Every fact in the universe has meaning—may I say, interpretation—by virtue of its place in the knowledge and plan of God."

What does God know? Well, we teach our kids in the little catechism, "What does God know? God knows all things. And what do we mean by all things? We really mean all things, all things."

And so the next question is, I think, a logical question. "So what does God do with all of this knowledge?"

Have you ever met anybody who was really, really smart when it came to knowledge, but had just fallen off the turnip truck when it came to wisdom? Have you ever met anybody like that? Don't need to name names, but have you ever met anybody like that?

Well, we understand just by personal experience that there is a distinction between what we might call the white light of knowledge and actual wisdom. And we understand, not only from Scripture, Scripture bears this out. But we understand from experience that wisdom is the application of knowledge for a desired end. So a wise person is able to take what he knows and apply it to circumstances to bring about a desired end. And that is a wise person. You go to a person like that for counsel because what they can do is they can look at the circumstances. They can know all the information and they can come up with a course of action to bring about a desired end. And that is a wise person.

And, in fact, in the proverbs wisdom is simply the one who knows how to apply the knowledge of God in the fear of God.

So what does God do with all of this knowledge?

Now you talk about the information highway. The mind of God that is the eternal, comprehensive information highway. But there is more to God's omniscience than him merely knowing all things. He is also all wise.

J I Packer in his contemporary classic, *Knowing God*, if you have never read Packer's *Knowing God*, I would urge you read *Knowing God*. I read it at age 21 and it changed my life. It changed my view of God. It made me realize that it was more important that God knew me than that I knew God.

Packer says, "Power is as much of God's essence as wisdom is. Omniscience governing omnipotence." Do you hear that? "Omniscience governing omnipotence, infinite power ruled by infinite wisdom is a basic biblical description of the divine character."

And then he lists a bunch of passages where God's two attributes of wisdom and power are joined together all over Scripture.

And then he said, "Wisdom without power," do you hear? "Wisdom without power would be pathetic, a broken reed. But power without wisdom would merely be frightening. But in God boundless wisdom and endless power are united and this makes him utterly worthy of our fullest trust."

And so here is the God who has all knowledge. Here is the God who has all wisdom. Here is the God who we are going to find out has all power. In fact, if you can't figure that out from the first number of questions in verse 12 then you are clueless. The God who can measure all the mountains on his set of scales has all power. And he is the God who says, "Who has directed my Spirit? Who has been my counselor to inform me?"

And so the question is: What does God know? All things. Well, what does God do with all that knowledge? Well, he is all wise, working out his own ends so that we can say with absolute certainty, absolute certainty...

I mean, how many things in this world are absolutely certain? We can say with absolute certainty that because God is all knowing and all wise and all powerful, at the end of this age, God will have made the best of all possible worlds with the best of all possible ends secured and there will be no second guessing the wisdom and the might and the knowledge of God.

And so in light of that, here is the question. Who has taken it upon himself to instruct this great God? When was the last time the Lord God almighty asked you your opinion? Not that we have not offered it.

It was Mark Twain who said that all men want to serve God. They just want to do it in an advisory capacity.

See, we all have... you know, we get into a bind. Isn't this the way that we work? I mean, this is how arrogant we are. We get into a bind. We start to see trial. We are compressed from all sides. We don't know how it is going to work out and then we start praying. And then what do we start doing? We start suggesting to God ways in which he can fix it.

Now you know what I have found is that God rarely ever follows what I thought he should have done. In fact, he usually does things that have not even crossed this puny, fallen, finite mind. And so here is the great argument of the book of Job.

Job throughout the first two chapters Job exemplifies patience. Chapter three his deacons... I mean his friends show up. I could have said elders, too, fellow deacons, ok?

And then things begin to go south for Job.

And one Puritan who is very honest says, "Not only can we speak of the patience of Job, but we can equally speak of the impatience of Job because what Job ended up doing on these cycles of discourse with his three friends who were not much help at all, worthless physicians he calls them, 'oh, you, you are the men and wisdom will die with you.'"

The sarcasm in Job is wonderful. And Job says, "If I could just have my day in court and set my case before the almighty. Then I would be vindicated before heaven and earth." Poor Job.

And then he backs off and he says, "But I can't, because he is too big."

And then at the end of the book God says to Job, "Job, you have put me in the dock, the place of the accused."

You know, in the English court of law that is... the accused sits in a place called the dock and he sits there until judgment is passed whether he is guilty or innocent.

"Job, you have put me in the dock, but guess what? I don't belong there. You do. And so hop up in the chair because I am going to ask you a bunch of questions now."

And notice. God never says to Job, "Job, you just don't understand. One of these days you can read the first two chapters of the book and you will see that it was this thing between me and Satan and then it will all make sense to you."

Is that what God said? God doesn't even mention the devil except maybe by some obscure allusion with leviathan. And do you know what he says about leviathan?

"Job, don't I just take a hook and stick it in leviathan's jaw and lead him wherever I want? Job, where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Did I ask you for any information or counsel? Job, you don't know what you are talking about."

And Job's response is the wisest thing that he says in the whole book.

"I cover my mouth and I repent in dust and ashes."

Who has been his counselor? Nobody. Who has he ever gone for information to? Nobody.

God does what he does and he does it with omniscience. He does it with omnisapience. He does it with omnipotence. And there is nobody who can question his ways and there is nobody who can give him counsel or information because his understanding is inscrutable and his ways are past finding out. And this is the great God who has revealed himself to us in holy Scripture.

Then God goes to his transcendence over the nations, verses 15 to 17.

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. Even Lebanon is not enough to burn, Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before Him, They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and [empty].⁹

God now moves to the nations. And when you stop and think about turns of human might, it is the nations that form the largest standard of might. And God says that the nations are like a drop in the bucket, infinitesimal, insignificant. You miss a drop from the bucket you are not missing anything. And the nations, all of the nations are like one single drop from God's bucket.

And then he says that they are a speck of dust on a scale.

Now stop and imagine the ancient world. You are going to go and you are going to buy some fruit or you are going to buy some meat or you are going to buy some flour. And the person is about to put it on the scale. They are going to weigh it out.

There was nobody who said, "Hold on a second. Dust off that part of the scale because there might be some dust on it."

They didn't do that for a very simple reason. It didn't affect the weight. A speck of dust would not affect the weight on the scale. And that is the point. The nations are a speck of dust on God's scale. They are insignificant.

Now that does not mean that the nations are not important to God. That is not what he is saying. What he is saying is that the nations by comparison are infinitesimally small.

And then it says, "He lifts up the islands like fine dust."¹⁰

⁹ Isaiah 40:15-17.

¹⁰ Isaiah 40:15.

Once again omnipotence, infinite power, incomprehensible strength and might is lifting up the nations like they are just dust or the islands.

And I have lived somewhat a sheltered life. I have never been to any of the islands and never seen islands. I mean, not that I can recall. But, you know, you look on the map and, you know, Australia is an island, right? It is a pretty sizable island, you know. The coast land, yeah, you know, look at the Mediterranean, a lot of islands. It is with the same energy that takes to lift up dust, God lifts up the islands.

And then he moves to this imagery about Lebanon. He goes from the nations to almost a religious imagery as Umbright says, "Nature becomes his temple. Lebanon his altar, its lordly words, its pile and the countless beasts his sacrifice."

Once again infinitude. He is not dependent upon the nations in any way. he is not dependent upon any part of his creation in any way. The biggest structures in his creation would be the nations and he is not dependent upon them for anything, but, rather, they are utterly dependent upon him. It is God who raises up kings and knocks them down. It is God who raises up kingdoms and knocks them down. And they are wholly dependent upon him. He is infinitely greater than the mightiest of the nations.

Now stop and think about this. Preaching to a people yet to be afflicted what are those oppressed in Babylon going to think when they hear this good news that the nations are nothing in his sight, not even the mighty Babylon?

That is what a biblical world view will do for you. A biblical world view will take the evil world powers and put them in perspective of the infinite eternal God. And so what fear do we need of Babylon? What fear do we need to have of a Kaddafi? What fear do we need to have of the most wicked and seemingly powerful dictators and the most wicked and violent of nations?

And the answer is we need not fear them. Be nothing in the sight of our God.

Now that is a word of hope when you are being oppressed. These verses, 12 to 17, demand that we stand back in awe before the greatness of God, before the incomprehensible greatness.

In fact, these truths about God demand reflection and meditation. What God is worthy of reflection and meditation except a God who can be described like this?

Recently I was wonderfully gripped by a book called *My Heart in His Hands*, the story of Anne Judson of Burma, the first wife of the great American missionary Adoniram Judson. And Anne Judson, she wasn't Anne Judson at the time, but she was converted and she wrote these words upon her conversion.

“My chief happiness now consisted in contemplating the moral perfections of the glorious God. I longed to have all intelligent creatures love him and felt that even fallen spirits could never be released from their obligations to love a being possessed of such glorious perfections. I felt happy in the consideration that so benevolent a being governed the world and ordered every passing event. I lost all disposition to murmur at any providence assured that such a being could not err in any dispensation. Sin and myself and others appeared as that abominable thing which a holy God hates and I earnestly strove to avoid sinning, not merely because I was afraid of hell, but because I feared to displease God and grieve his Holy Spirit. I attended my studies in school with a far different feeling and different motives from what I had ever done before. I felt my obligation to improve all that I had to the glory of God. And since he in his providence had favored me with advantages for improving my mind, I felt that I should not be a slothful servant. Rather, I diligently employed all of my hours in school in acquiring useful knowledge and spent my evenings and part of the night in spiritual enjoyments.”

Anne Judson wrote that at age 16, though I am sure she was a wonderfully bright person. She went to learn Burmese and Siamese and was an inestimable help to Adoniram Judson as they went to Burma.

But, you know, there is something that is far more impressive than her apparently intellect at age 16 and that is her obvious fixation on the greatness of God. Such a great and glorious God demands our reflection and meditation. And let us face it. We do not fix our minds on him nearly enough.

Are you worried about being bored in heaven after the first million years? Well, do not worry because we will have an infinite, eternal God who will never for one millisecond ever bore his children.

How in the world can we ever plumb the depths of an incomprehensible God throughout all the ages. And if that is the case, why not begin now contemplating, meditating, reflecting on this great and glorious God?

These truths not only demand reflection and meditation, but these truths about God also demand a proclamation. Did we not already read it in verse nine?

“Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; Lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, ‘[Behold] your God!’”¹¹

These truths about the greatness of God absolutely demand that we proclaim his greatness.

Now stop and think about it of a moment. If you and I cannot exhaust the inexhaustible greatness of God either here nor in eternity, then why in the world should we not

¹¹ Isaiah 40:9.

proclaim his greatness with a zeal and a fervency? What in the world does this world need more than a clear picture of the infinite, incomprehensible great God?

And yet what do we do?

John Piper says that, “God is unwittingly belittled, for those who are stunned by the indescribable magnitude of what God has made, not to mention the infinite greatness of the one who made it, the steady diet on Sunday mornings of practical how tos and psychological soothing and relational therapy and tactical planning seems dramatically out of touch with reality which is the God of overwhelming greatness.”

“Why in the world would any of God’s children in their right mind—I guess that is the major qualifying point—in their right mind settle for anything less on the Lord’s Day than God centered worship that is caught up in the greatness of God and has nothing to do with you or me? Why should we settle for preaching that doesn’t extol the greatness of the godhead? Why should we settle for worship which is trite and man centered and carnal?”

I had an interesting conversation today with a very good friend of mine who is at a church that does things much, much, much differently than we do. And I was talking to this friend of mine and he had noted that his pastor was critical of my criticisms of seeker sensitive church services. And my friend told his pastor.

His pastor said, “You know, I don’t criticize him for the way he does things. Why does he have to criticize the things that we do?”

And my friend clarified. “First of all, he has never specifically criticized us. But the reason you don’t criticize the things he does and the reason he criticizes the things we do is because he has a conviction that compels him to such criticism.”

And the conviction is this. Everything that we do in worship needs to be governed by the Word of God. And to do anything else is radical departure from that commitment. If you don’t have that commitment there is nothing to criticize.

If you have that commitment you look around the evangelical landscape and you are disheartened with the triteness and the superficiality of what we call evangelical worship.

If we have a vision of the greatness of God, the God of Isaiah chapter 40, then we come to this place, a warehouse, of all places, to not only exalt this great God, but to exalt in him because he is worthy. And it is a passage like Isaiah 40 that keeps the greatness of God and his transcendence fixed before our minds so that we do not drift into the trite, into the superficial, into the man centered, into the carnal, but rather do our best as imperfect and as fraught as everything we do is. It is still fixed on one who is such much greater than us.

Oh, I don't think for a minute that we have it down. We have much to learn. And we have much room to grow. And we, of all people, have much reason to be humble before God.

But we will not move from being fixed on the greatness of God and the smallness of man because in that is not only the heart of the gospel, it is the heart of God.

These truths demand God exalting worship. These truths about God demand a God centeredness in every thing that we do. It is all about him.

You know, it is great when teenagers get saved and learn that it is not all about them. It is all about him. It takes absolutely... it takes a change of heart. We come into this world and there we are in a little bassinette and guess what we think? As unsophisticated and unlearned as we are, guess what we think there laying in that bassinette? It is all about us.

And do you know the thing is that we never outgrow it? It just gets worse. And then God comes and he changes our heart and do you know what he does? He all of the sudden changes our perspective so that we realize it is not all about us. It is all about him and his glory and we exist for him, not him for us.

Tom Wells in his book *God is King* has a most penetrating section where he says this.

“As long as we ask the question, ‘Why is God doing this to me?’ we never understand that we are a means to an end and not an end in itself. The person that says, ‘Why does God do this to me?’ thinks that they are an end in themselves and has not come to grips with the fact that they are a means in God’s plan. God is not a means in their plan.”

What we have done in modern evangelical preaching, what we have done in evangelism is we have turned God into a means for our ends and that is not the way the Bible presents it. The Bible presents us as a means to God’s ends which is to glorify himself and enjoy himself forever. We are a part of his purpose. We are a part of his plan. And let’s face it. As much as we take great, great comfort—and I don’t want to underestimate this for one millisecond of how much God loves us and the great mercy that he shows to us in Jesus Christ. Understand that we are a small part of the puzzle.

The world history did not really truly begin at the moment of your earth and it will not truly cease at the moment of your death. It was before us. It will be after us. We are a small part of God’s overall purpose. And the minute we begin to realize we exist for God’s ends and not vice versa, then we no longer say, “God, why are you doing this to me?” But we may cry out with the prophets and psalmists and say, “Oh, Lord, how long?” And, “Search me, oh God, and try my heart.” And cry out, “Teach me, oh Lord, your ways.”

When we realize that God is not content being the foundation, but he wants to be all in all, that is a common metaphor for God, isn't it? The foundation? God is the foundation of everything we do.

When was the last time you praised your foundation? In fact, I don't think, at least not in recent time that I can remember, have we ever got up on a Lord's Day morning and said, "You know, let's just bow for a moment of thanksgiving for the foundation upon which we stand."

Do you know if this foundation wasn't level—it is not—but let's just hypothetically say if this foundation wasn't level, if there were cracks, we wouldn't be able to stand here as firm as we are able to stand. So let's praise the foundation.

Well, you don't praise the foundation. You assume the foundation.

When we lived in Portland we never took anybody down into the basement and said, "Now, look around. Do you see all the cinderblock? Isn't this a glorious, glorious foundation? Have you ever seen anything quite like it?"

No. God does not like to be used, described by metaphors which we just assume, but don't praise.

Is God the foundation? Oh, you better believe he is the foundation, but he is also the superstructure and everything else. He is all in all. And what he requires is that we ourselves put ourselves in a frame of mind and a way of life that keeps him front and center before all things. We too easily forget the great God and begin to get a Nebuchadnezzar syndrome. And oh what change that man Nebuchadnezzar, his sense returned to him when he looked up and acknowledged the great God of heaven that he is the King of all kings and his dominion is an everlasting dominion and he gives rulership to whomever he pleases and takes it from whomever he pleases.

Isaiah 12:17.

And then we have another question and we have time for this, I think.

"To whom, then, will you liken God?"¹²

Isn't that a great question? You know what the answer is, don't you? Nobody. The answer is really obvious. Who are you going to liken this God to, Dagon? Read 1 Samuel five. He is not much of a god. Baal? Marduk?

To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him? As for the idol, a craftsman casts it, A goldsmith plates it with gold, And a silversmith fashions chains of silver. He who is too

¹² Isaiah 40:17.

impoverished for such an offering
Selects a tree that does not rot; He seeks
out for himself a skillful craftsman
To prepare an idol that will not totter.¹³

You understand, this is a wonderful, wonderful conclusion, because the next section is going to be more application to God's people. This is a wonderful conclusion to this 12 to 17 part on the greatness of God, the uniqueness of God.

Who in the world could be like this transcendent Creator? And then Isaiah who is going to be the master of ridiculing idolatry.... if you are going to ridicule anything, idolatry is the thing you should ridicule. And he begins to expose the folly of taking part of the creation and making it into a god.

And so he rather sarcastically says, "Let's get a big chunk of metal and so we are going to be creatures choosing a part of the creation and then we are going to take it to a craftsman, by the way, who is also part of the creation. And we are going to ask this craftsman to fashion this for us into a god. Once the craftsman fashions this hunk of metal into a god, then we are going to take it to the goldsmith who, by the way, is actually a part of the creation. And we are going to ask him to take our god which is from the earth and cover it with more stuff from the earth."

You see the folly in this, don't you?

We are going to decorate our god. If you are going to have a god you might as well have a nice looking god, a rather expensive god.

But then, of course, you want to have a glorious looking god so you cover it with gold. But then you realize that there is a fundamental problem so you go to the silversmith and have to make a chain because God's that wobble and fall down are usually not very impressive. And so you get a god that has a chain around it for stability because the last thing we want is beautiful, glorious gold covered gods falling over.

You see, Dagon should have had a chain around him because when they put the ark of the covenant next to him in 1 Samuel five he fell over. And then the came and put him back and he fell over the next day and he lost his head and his hands. And all of the sudden they realized, we think it was a mistake to take the ark.

Wobbly gods are not gods to be trusted.

Isaiah gets worse in the next chapter. You have to carry it. Cart it around. You want a God who can carry you. You don't want to have to be responsible for toting your own deity.

And then Isaiah very sensitive to the lower class and the poor says, "And if you always too poor for that kind of god, you can go out into the woods and find a hunk of wood.

¹³ Isaiah 40:18-20.

And you can find a hunk of wood that looks pretty good and sturdy and then you can take it and make sure it doesn't totter."

The folly of idolatry. Do you know what idolatry does? Idolatry exchanges the greatness, the incomprehensibility, the infinity, the glory, the majesty, the splendor of the eternal God who is the creator of all things, takes all of that and exchanges it for the creation. It is an absolutely foolish exchange. In fact, it is spiritually insane to exchange that God for silver, gold or wood that falls over.

And so the closing statement on idolatry is almost as if Isaiah is saying, "Do you think you can trust the God of verses 12 to 17?"

Well, what is your option? To put your hope in that wobbly god that can't even stand up by itself?

Isaiah chapter 40 verses 12 to 20 maintains the Creator creation distinction that is absolutely vital in knowing God. You understand that that is why New Age Paganism is so absolutely harmful to us as a culture morally, ethically and spiritually because it completely—as Peter Jones wonderfully reminded us—it totally erases a distinction between the Creator and the creation.

And once we understand the greatness of our God, then we understand this word "transcendence." He is wholly other than us. And he is painted for us in terms of glorious transcendence that goes beyond anything you can fathom.

And so when you are about to lay your head down on your pillow tonight and go to sleep and hopefully the last words in our minds are words to our God and our Father, let us remember that the God with whom we are speaking is the infinite, eternal, majestic, glorious, great God who olds all the waters in the hollow of his hand.

Let's pray.

Father, there is no doubt that words certainly fail us. And what can we say to you who know our thoughts before we speak, them? Father, you are great and greatly to be praised. And, Father, we would plead with you in the strong name of Jesus that you would always be exalted by this people and that you would be our chiefest joy. Father, we love you tonight and we praise you. Father, I pray for those around us, children, parents, brothers, sisters, neighbors, coworkers, Father, who are ignorant of you and have suppressed the knowledge of you in their own hearts. Father, may we be so zealous in the knowledge of you, our God, that we say to those around us, "Behold this great and mighty God who is worthy of your worship, worthy of your praise." Father, be glorified in our lives, be glorified in our witness, be glorified in this church in Christ's holy name we pray. Amen.