

Faith in the Power of God

Lesson for February 4, 2024

Unit III: The Righteous Live by Faith

Adult Topic: Power without Equal

Background Scripture: Isaiah 40:12-31

Printed Text: Isaiah 40:12-13, 25-31

Key verse: “*He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.*” (Isaiah 40:29, NIV)

In a seminary missions class, Herbert Jackson told how, as a new missionary, he was assigned a car that would not start without a push. After pondering his problem, he devised a plan. He went to the school near his home, got permission to take some children out of class, and had them push his car off. As he made his rounds, he would either park on a hill or leave the engine running. He used this ingenious procedure for two years.

Ill health forced the Jackson family to leave, and a new missionary came to that station. When Jackson proudly began to explain his arrangement for getting the car started, the new man began looking under the hood. Before the explanation was complete, the new missionary interrupted, “Why, Dr. Jackson, I believe the only trouble is this loose cable.” He gave the cable a twist, stepped into the car, pushed the switch, and to Jackson's astonishment, the engine roared to life. For two years needless trouble had become routine. The power was there all the time. Only a loose connection kept Jackson from putting that power to work.

J.B. Phillips paraphrases Ephesians 1:19-20, “*How tremendous is the power available to us who believe in God.*” When we make firm our connection with God, his life and power flow through us.

Ernest B. Bevers

The power of nature can make us feel small and insignificant. ... Isaiah reminds us that the God who created everything around us is worthy of our trust (*Townsend Press Commentary*, 2023-2024, p. 205).

Key Terms

1. **Calls** (verse 26) – Proclaims; reads; summons.
2. **Counselor** (verse 13) – The Old Testament counselor served to advise the king on such matters as national defense and plans for war. At times, however, this advisory capacity was granted to others. Isaiah presents a series of rhetorical questions that emphasize the fact that God needs no human counselors (40:13).
3. **Created** (verse 26) – To cause something to exist which did not exist before, as distinguished from *make*, to re-form something already in existence.
4. **Equal** (verse 25) – To be like; compare to; put upon the same footing,
5. **Hidden** (verse 27) – To hide; to bury; to conceal.
6. **Measured** (verse 12) – Marked by due proportion; deliberate, calculated.

Lesson Background

The book of Isaiah is the first book of the Major Prophets. Isaiah wrote to those in Judah and Jerusalem “in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (Isaiah 1:1). His audience consisted of Jews who served under the reigns of these four kings.

Consisting of 66 chapters, Isaiah is one of the longest books in the Bible, second only to Psalms in number of chapters. However, it consists of three major parts. The first section details God's impending judgment against ancient peoples for sin and idolatry (chapters 1—35).

The second section includes a brief segment consisting of chapters 36—39. In this section, Isaiah briefly explains a failed assault on Jerusalem during the rule of Hezekiah, yet God rescues the city. In chapter 39, visitors from Babylon arrive in Jerusalem, foreshadowing the future destruction of Jerusalem by this kingdom.

The third section focuses on God's future salvation for His people (Isaiah 40—66). They predict Israel's rescue from Babylonian captivity (Isaiah 40—48), the promised Messiah (Isaiah 49—57), and the final glory of Jerusalem and God's people (Isaiah 58—66).

Isaiah 40 marks the beginning of the second section of the book. The historical context for this part of Isaiah is the Babylonian exile, during which many Israelites were taken captive to Babylon. The Babylonian exile is thought to have occurred in the 6th century BCE, several centuries after the time of the historical Isaiah.

In Isaiah 40, the tone shifts from judgment to comfort and encouragement. The chapter opens with the famous words, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God” (Isaiah 40:1, ESV). The message here is one of hope and restoration. The chapter goes on to proclaim the greatness of God, emphasizing His power, sovereignty, and faithfulness. It also anticipates the eventual return of the exiled Israelites to their homeland.

Though the chapter begins with the words comfort, the comfort Isaiah is commanded to proclaim is valuable only because the people had been suffering. Verse 2 makes clear that the source of their suffering had been their own sinfulness. Comfort comes not to those who deserve a reward but instead to those who have already felt the pain and the sting of where sin can lead you in life.

But the rest of this passage also conveys the link between getting serious about life's jagged edges and the emergence of true comfort. Verses 3 through 5 begin with "a voice of one calling" in the wilderness. The cry is amazing. God is coming! God is coming! Prepare the highway for our God! Remove the obstructions. Get ready! God is coming! The preparation the people are to make is a spiritual preparation, namely, repentance. All spiritual obstacles and every spiritual obstruction must be removed from the hearts of the people. Notice the result of the coming of the King in Isaiah 40:5. When he comes, "*The glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.*"

A second herald occurs in verse 6. The command of a voice says to cry out. The question returns, "What shall I cry?" The message to cry out follows in the rest of verse 6 through verse 8. People are like grass which fade and wither. People are like the flower whose beauty passes away. But the word of our God will stand forever.

Verses 9-11 are the herald of "good news". Zion (people of God) is called to go up on a high mountain and shout out the good news. Lift up your voice with strength to the ends of the earth and tell people to, "*See your God!*" Look, God comes with might. His reward and his reward is with Him. God has power and God has reward. Listen how God is coming. "He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are young." God is coming with compassion and care. He is coming as a shepherd to tend His flock. God is coming to save. God desires to save like a shepherd for his sheep.

Lesson in Depth

I. God's Greatness: Incomparable Omnipotence and Omniscience (Isaiah 40:12-13, 25-26)

Isaiah shifts in verse 12 from the great shepherd to discuss the great power of God – the God over all creation. By a series of questions, to which the implied answer is "no one," the prophet emphasized the omnipotence and omniscience of God, the God whose coming is to bring comfort to Israel according to verses 1-11.

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand: Another aspect of our God for us to behold is *His authority over all creation*. Our God is so great, and so dominant over all creation, that He **has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand** and has **measured heaven with a span**. God is so great, so dominant over all creation that we should stand in awe of His power and glory.

Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket: It isn't just about size; it's also about smarts. God is so great in His wisdom and intelligence that He **calculated the dust of the earth in a measure**. God knows exactly how many grains of dust there are on the earth. Even if a person

knew the number of hairs on their head (as God knows, according to Luke 12:7), they could never calculate the dust in their own house – much less the dust of the earth.

To take it further, God knows how heavy the mountains are (He **weighed the mountains in scales**), and the hills also for that matter! (**And the hills in a balance**) God alone has power to create the physical universe and the earth in perfect balance, weighing mountains and seas perfectly, so that the earth moves perfectly in space. This matter of the amazing balance of our planet is called the science of isostasy. Equilibrium in the earth's crust such that the forces tending to elevate landmasses balance the forces tending to depress landmasses.

He created the water and placed it where He wanted it. All of His calculations are perfect. Though He is big enough to create the universe and all that is in it, He is small enough to live within our heart.

Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD: God is so wise, that no one has directed the Spirit of the LORD; no one as His counselor has taught Him. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament used in the days of Jesus and the disciples), this is translated Who has known the mind of the Lord? The apostle Paul quoted this line in Romans 11:34.

Or instruct the LORD as his counselor: God needs no **counsel**, no *instruction*, no *teacher*, and no one to show Him **the way of understanding**.

Isaiah points to the incomparable wisdom of God. God is the only Being in the universe that possesses independence from the Creation. The only limits to God's freedom are in His own nature and attributes. He is unlimited in His existence. Because His existence relates to His nature rather than His will, God will exist and must continue to exist forever.

In verses 14-24, God's greatness is measured in comparison to others. Since the surrounding nations who had oppressed Israel were utterly insignificant in comparison to the Lord's greatness and power, they could not prevent His purposes from being accomplished. His deliverance of Israel was certain. God's greatness surpasses all nations (15-17). The prophet sarcastically indicated the futility of trying to portray the immensity of God – His power, wisdom, and resources – in the form of a man-made idol, no matter how ornate, durable, and immovable. God's greatness surpasses all idols (18-20). Finally, Isaiah extolled God as Creator, in whom the Jews were to put their full trust. To worship anything that you could see with physical eyes would be worshipping someone's creation and not the Creator. Those who do such things are without excuse. God controls our destiny. God's greatness is evident (21-24).

“To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?”: When we read the Old Testament, there is no idol that is equal to God, and God wins every contest against every idol and their priests, just as Elijah called down fire from heaven: “Elijah answered the captain, ‘If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!’ Then fire fell from heaven and consumed the captain and his men” (2 Kings 1:10). Unlike false gods and the practices of those who worship them, God is morally pure or holy. If we compare the God of the

Bible to the idols and false gods of today, the God of the Bible and the life and ministry of Jesus the Son of God remains far superior to any of them in holiness, power, justice and mercy.

Israel was foolish to compare such a sovereign, almighty Lord with the gods of their Babylonian captors (see verse 18). The answer to these two questions could only be no one:

1 John 5:7 “*For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.*”

Who created all these? Who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name: Isaiah encourages us to look up at the stars and remember that God created the heavenly host. Speaking poetically, Isaiah says that the stars come out and shine when God calls them by name and brings them out in great numbers on a starry night. With the billions and billions of stars in the universe, it is staggering to know that God can number and name them all.

Many of God’s attributes are listed in this verse. Isaiah’s words emphasize the strength and power of God who as the Creator of all will comfort us personally and meet our individual needs, by name, just as every star has a name and God calls them to shine by name. Though we cannot see and number all of them with our naked eyes, God knows the number of the stars in the heavens and keeps count whenever He creates a new star.

II. God’s Greatness: Vigilant Omnipresence (Isaiah 40:27-31)

In verses 27-31 the prophet applied the comforting truths (in verses 1-26), about God to Israel’s situation in Babylon during the coming captivity.

Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD”: In light of who God is, how could His people in exile have thought He had forgotten them or was ignorant of their condition?

Not all of the Jews recognized that they were suffering just punishment for their sins, and that God had told them in advance through the Law of Moses and the prophets that He would punish them (as He was doing) if they broke His law and practiced what the nations did in the Promised Land before He destroyed them and helped the Jews establish themselves in the land. They thought God did not see them suffering. Some thought God was unjust. Some thought God was disregarding their rights as the children of God. In the following verses, God responds to their complaint through His prophet.

Have you not known?: The people who are asked this question in Isaiah 40:21 doubted there was a God who created all. The ones who are asked the same question in this verse seem to know there is a creator, but live as *practical* atheists. They don’t seem to understand that the fact there is a God of all creation makes a difference in everyday life.

Have you not heard? These practical atheists need to hear what they already know: that the Lord GOD is **the Creator of the ends of the earth**. Then they need to hear *about* the Creator: that He **neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable.**

Through Isaiah, God continues to encourage His people throughout all generations by telling them about God's attributes. God is everlasting, so He cannot and will not pass out of existence. God is the Creator of the earth from end to end. God is not like a human being, because God will never faint or grow weary. God will never let us down because He will not faint in a distressing situation. God will never be unable to help us because He will never grow weary; for, as Isaiah said, God is great in strength and mighty in power. If we are suffering, we might not understand why; but God understands why and His understanding is unsearchable.

We can pray, and He will explain — when He knows we are ready to understand more of His ways and the whys of them. The first place to go for understanding is always to the Bible, and the most important things to understand are the many truths about God that the Bible reveals

God was not too weak to act on their behalf, nor was fatigue an obstacle for the Creator in caring for His people (verses 29-30). Though even the young and strong become tired and fall, the Ancient of Days never does.

To the human mind, God's wisdom is not fully comprehensible in how He chooses to fulfill His promises to deliver Israel. Paul saw a future illustration of this truth in God's plan for the final restoration of Israel (Romans 11:33; see Isaiah 40:13).

He planned salvation from the foundation of the earth. He became our substitute. He is not a man that He should tire. He lives in eternity where all of time from the beginning to the end is one eternal day. He is everlasting God. He is Lord of all. He is the Creator of all. He is all knowledge and understanding. He is Omnipotent, Omnipresent, Omniscient.

He gives power to the weak: After explaining all the greatness and glory of God, now Isaiah explains another benefit we can receive from our God – He gives us His great power.

Notice who God gives power to: **the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength.** Those who are proud and confident in their own wisdom and strength will receive no **strength** from God.

Even the youths shall faint and be weary: Those who thought themselves strong find themselves weak. God's strength is reserved for those who know they are **weak**, and know they **have no might**.

But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength: How do we receive this strength from the LORD? We receive it as we **wait on the LORD**. The idea behind **wait on the LORD** is not a passive sitting around until the LORD does something. Yes, God gives us strength; but we don't expect it to come as if He were pouring it into us as we sit passively. He brings it to us as we seek Him, and rely on Him, instead of our own strength. If we are weak, it is because we do not **wait on the LORD**.

We are also told that we **renew** our **strength**. It is strength that was once received when we first came to the LORD in **weakness** and **no might**. Then, that strength is renewed as we wait on the LORD. **Renew** is "from a basic meaning 'to change'... it means 'to put on afresh': here, 'keep putting on fresh strength.'" (Motyer)

They shall mount up with wings like eagles: This is the *measure* of strength the LORD gives us – strength to soar above everything else.

They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint: This is the *purpose* of the strength the LORD gives us – strength to move forward and progress for Him. It isn't strength to show off, but strength to go forward in.

Weak in Isaiah 40:29 and **faint** in Isaiah 40:30 are the same Hebrew word, which means “failure through loss of inherent strength.” **Weary** in Isaiah 40:30 is a different word, which means “exhaustion because of the hardness of life” (Motyer). If we are worn out for either reason, God is here to give us strength – if we will wait on Him.

Notice the order, because it seems strange. First, we **mount up with wings like eagles**. Then we **run**. Finally, we **walk**. First, we recognize that we soar up into heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6). Then we set ourselves on the course to run the race (Hebrews 12:1). Then we are in a good place to walk the walk. “*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him*” (Colossians 2:6).

Lesson Summary

Though the entire chapter is not covered in this week's lesson, the lessons learned cannot be learned in isolation from the overall theme of the chapter – comfort, strength and power through our omnipotent God.

1. **The Supremacy of God:** Isaiah 40 vividly portrays the greatness and supremacy of God. The chapter uses powerful imagery to convey the majesty of God, who is beyond human comprehension. Recognizing God's infinite nature can inspire awe and humility.
2. **God's Faithfulness and Consistency:** The chapter underscores the faithfulness of God to His promises. Despite the failures and sins of the people, God remains steadfast and merciful. This theme encourages trust in God's enduring love and commitment to His covenant.
3. **Human Frailty and God's Strength:** Isaiah 40 contrasts human frailty with God's strength. The imagery of grass withering and people being like grass highlights the transience of human life. In contrast, God's word endures forever. This encourages humility and dependence on God's enduring power.
4. **Renewal and Transformation:** The chapter speaks of God's ability to renew and transform. It describes God as the one who gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. This conveys the message of spiritual renewal and the transformative power of God in the lives of individuals and communities.
5. **God's Care for His Flock:** Isaiah 40 uses the metaphor of a shepherd caring for his flock, emphasizing God's tender care for His people. This imagery promotes trust in God's guidance, protection, and provision.
6. **Waiting on God's Timing:** The chapter encourages patience and waiting on God's timing. It conveys the idea that those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. This lesson teaches the importance of trust and endurance during challenging times.