

Isaiah's Book of Consolation (Isaiah 40-55)
(#3) The Great God who Brings Comfort (Isa. 40:12-31)

Outline of Isaiah 40-66

SECTION THREE: ORACLES OF REDEMPTION AND CONSUMMATION

- I. The Book of the Consolation of Israel (Chs. 40-55)
 - A. 40:1-11 The Prophet is to Announce God's Coming
 - B. 40:12-31 The God who brings Consolation (Salvation)

We have considered the message of the first 11 verses of Isaiah 40, in which we read of the Promise of God's Comfort to His People. This promise of God to bring comfort must itself have been a cause of comfort to the people who were under the wrath of God for their sins when they received this message of salvation. But actually the degree of comfort that the promise of God's comfort could bring them is contingent on several matters. Perhaps chief among these is the degree of confidence that the people under God's wrath would have in their God who promised them salvation. If the people had little confidence in their God's ability to bring to pass what He had promised, then only little comfort was possible for them. But if the people had great confidence in their God's ability to bring to pass what He had promised, then great comfort was possible for them. The God who has promised comfort is capable of bringing His comfort, or salvation, to His people. It is fitting that the subject we have in Isaiah 40:12-31 follows immediately upon the initial promise of God of 40:1-11. The prophet first revealed the promise of God, then He revealed the ability of God to bring to pass His promise. Let us read the next major division of Isaiah's Book of Consolation, **Isaiah 40:12-31**.

¹²Who has measured the water in the hollow of His hand,
Measured heaven with a span
And calculated the dust of the earth in a measure?
Weighed the mountains in scales
And the hills in a balance?

¹³Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD,
Or as His counselor has taught Him?

¹⁴With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him,
And taught Him in the path of justice?
Who taught Him knowledge,
And showed Him the way of understanding?

¹⁵Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket,
And are counted as the small dust on the scales;
Look, He lifts up the isles as a very little thing.

¹⁶And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn,
Nor its beasts sufficient for a burnt offering.

¹⁷All nations before Him are as nothing,
And they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless.

¹⁸To whom then will you liken God?

Or what likeness will you compare to Him?

¹⁹The workman molds an image,
The goldsmith overspreads it with gold,
And the silversmith casts silver chains.
²⁰Whoever is too impoverished for such a contribution
Chooses a tree that will not rot;
He seeks for himself a skillful workman
To prepare a carved image that will not totter.

²¹Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

²²It is He who sits above the circle of the earth,

And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.

²³He brings the princes to nothing;
He makes the judges of the earth useless.

²⁴Scarcely shall they be planted,
Scarcely shall they be sown,
Scarcely shall their stock take root in the earth,
When He will also blow on them,
And they will wither,
And the whirlwind will take them away like stubble.

²⁵“To whom then will you liken Me,
Or to whom shall I be equal?” says the Holy One.

²⁶Lift up your eyes on high,
And see who has created these things,
Who brings out their host by number;
He calls them all by name,
By the greatness of His might
And the strength of His power;
Not one is missing.

²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob,
And speak, O Israel:

“My way is hidden from the LORD,
And my just claim is passed over by my God”?

²⁸Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The everlasting God, the LORD,
The Creator of the ends of the earth,
Neither faints nor is weary.
His understanding is unsearchable.

²⁹He gives power to the weak,
And to those who have no might He increases strength.

³⁰Even the youths shall faint and be weary,

And the young men shall utterly fall,
³¹But those who wait on the LORD
Shall renew their strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.

Now when one studies a portion of Scripture, not only should the *meaning* of the sentences and paragraphs of the context be the object of our attention and understanding, but attention should also be given to the *purpose* for which a passage serves in the context in which it is found. In other words, let us attempt to answer the question, “What was written?”, but let us not fail to also answer the question, “Why was it written?” For example, in our passage, we read a number of statements that emphasize the greatness of our God—that is what is written. We should attempt to understand these truths as written. But further, let us ask ourselves, “Why did Isaiah include this passage and why did he include it here? And again, the reason that this passage is included here was to give troubled, defeated, doubting, and helpless people hope and assurance that their God *could* and *would* bring to pass what He had promised them. This people could be assured that God was able to do what He had promised, because He is a great and mighty God. And so, as we work through this passage we will attempt to consider both aspects, what was written and why it was written for the people of God.

Here is an outline that may help us to digest our passage¹:

1. God is incomparable to anything in creation (40:12-17)
2. God is incomparable to anything the creation can create (40:18-20)
3. God is incomparable to the creature itself (40:21-26)
4. God’s people should not feel forsaken or forgotten, for He is able to comfort His people (40:27-31)

Let us first consider that...

1. God is incomparable to anything in creation (40:12-17)

In order to show the greatness of God to bring salvation to His people, Isaiah writes of the ease in which God measured the elements of the universe, when He had created them. It was as though God had measured the amount of waters of the oceans, the lakes, the rivers and streams, in the “hollow of His hand.” The vastness of the universe He measured by the span of His hand. The dust of the earth God measured according to the amount that He had determined. **Verse 12** reads,

¹²Who has measured the water in the hollow of His hand,
Measured heaven with a span
And calculated the dust of the earth in a measure?
Weighed the mountains in scales
And the hills in a balance?

¹ Here is another outline that may be preferred: The great God who brings deliverance (comfort) to His people...

1. Over against the world He has created (40:12-14)
2. Over against the nations of the earth (40:15-17)
3. In contrast to vain idols (40:18-20)
4. In contrast to the mighty of the earth (40:21-24)
5. God’s masterful control of the stars (40:25-27)
6. The Lord God, the source of all power (40:28-31)

The writer portrayed God as physically immense, in that all of creation is something that His hand was able to manage as He fashioned it as He had determined that it would exist. Now we know from Scripture that God is not a physical being with a body with hands. But Isaiah's description of God is an example of anthropomorphism, the attributing of human shape or human attributes to God. In displaying God as far greater in size and as sovereign over the physical creation which He made, the prophet is demonstrating the ability, even the ease, with which God can bring about what He promised in verses 1-11.

The three elements of creation are identified—water, earth, and the heavens. Through these words the prophet sought to instill a sense of comfort in the hearts of his people by showing the greatness of God who had bound Himself in His promise for their rescue from sin and for their everlasting well-being. I found the comments of John Calvin very helpful on this passage. We will read several of his comments. Here is what he wrote regarding God's purpose for this passage for His people:

Since, therefore, we ought continually to strive against distrust, and since Satan attacks us by various contrivances, it is of great importance that the promises of God should be believed by us, to give to his power the praise that it deserves. Now, because the restoration of the people was beyond belief, it was necessary that godly minds should be raised above the world, that they might not view the grace of God as limited to human means.

We see that the prophet does not merely teach that God is the Creator of heaven and earth, but applies to the present subject all that he relates concerning God's infinite power; and in like manner it is fitted for our guidance. When any adversity befalls us, our salvation is hidden, and, as if a cloud had come between, the power of God is concealed; we are held in astonishment, as if the Lord had forsaken and overlooked us. Let us not, therefore, think that the prophet speaks of some ordinary matter; for if this conviction of the power of God were deeply seated in our hearts, we would not be so much alarmed, and would not be disturbed by any calamity whatever. On this power, as we have said, Abraham leaned, that he might cordially embrace what was otherwise incredible; and, accordingly, Paul affirms (Romans 4:18) that "he hoped against hope;" for he believed that God was able to do what he had said, and did not waver or stagger in his mind. We are thus taught to raise our eyes above this world, that we may not judge by outward appearances, but may believe that what God hath spoken will come to pass, because all things are at his disposal.²

In verse 12 the prophet had challenged his readers to consider the unlimited *power of God* to bring to realization His promises to them. And then in verses 13 and 14 the prophet pressed upon his readers to consider the surpassing *wisdom of God*. God has no need of a teacher, a counselor, or an informer. He understands the nature of the problems of His people and the obstacles that lay before them. [By the way, we see here that prayer should not be seen as a means to inform God about matters that trouble us.] The conclusion that may be drawn from this is that our confidence in God to bring us "comfort", that is, the fullness of salvation to us, should not be dependent on our ability to see or understand how it is that God intends to deliver us. We read **verses 13 and 14**:

¹³Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD,
Or as His counselor has taught Him?

¹⁴With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him,
And taught Him in the path of justice?
Who taught Him knowledge,
And showed Him the way of understanding?

God has promised to bring His people deliverance from their sins. We may trust in our all-powerful and all-wise God to bring to pass what He has bound Himself to accomplish for us. Our God deals justly and rightly among the affairs of mankind. There should be no question in our minds as to God's ability to

² *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, Isaiah, PDF file, p. 133.

administer justice and regulate the affairs of His people unto their appointed end, that being the punishment of the wicked and the salvation of His elect.

And then we read in verse 15 that there is nothing in creation to which our God can be compared. When measured against Him, the nations are nothing; they are as a drop of water within a bucket full of water. Relatively speaking, they mean nothing in comparison to His greatness and power. When compared to God as on a scale, the nations of the world are as dust on the pan on one side compared with the overwhelming weight of the glory of God on the other side of the scale. He lifts up the islands with ease, perhaps here is the idea the when He is placed on one side of the scale, His weight raises the other side of the scale as though they weighed nothing at all. We read **verse 15**:

¹⁵Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket,
And are counted as the small dust on the scales;
Look, He lifts up the isles as a very little thing.

The point is that the nations, which held His people in exile and bondage, cannot be considered to be a challenge to Him in their power or ability to continue to enslave and afflict God's people. When God purposes to act, the nations are helpless to withstand His purposes to affect the deliverance of His people.

Similarly we may feel that our sin that binds us in its power, and the devil to whom we had surrendered our soul when we gave ourselves over to our sin, may seem too powerful for us to escape. But we should not think that our God cannot easily effect our deliverance by forgiving us of our sin and delivering us from the power of our sin through His grace.

The same idea was expressed by King David in **Psalm 62**, that forces that would bind us—the nations—are actually powerless to prevent our God from bring deliverance to us.

My soul, wait silently for God alone,
For my expectation is from Him.

⁶He only is my rock and my salvation;
He is my defense;
I shall not be moved.

⁷In God is my salvation and my glory;
The rock of my strength,
And my refuge, is in God.

⁸Trust in Him at all times, you people;
Pour out your heart before Him;
God is a refuge for us. Selah

⁹***Surely men of low degree are a vapor,
Men of high degree are a lie;
If they are weighed on the scales,
They are altogether lighter than vapor.***

¹⁰Do not trust in oppression,
Nor vainly hope in robbery;
If riches increase,
Do not set your heart on them.

¹¹God has spoken once,
Twice I have heard this:
That power belongs to God.

The prophet then argues in verse 16 that as beautiful and vast are the forests of Lebanon and as many animals that live in that nation, the firewood is not sufficient in quantity, the animals are not sufficient in

number, to offer a sacrifice that would be suitable to reflect the glory of our God; they would be insufficient value to render to God to reflect the honor that is due Him. We read **verse 16**:

¹⁶And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn,
Nor its beasts sufficient for a burnt offering.

And then the prophet ends this portion of his message by stating the total inability of the nations to prevent God from accomplishing His good designs to bring salvation to His people.

¹⁷All nations before Him are as nothing,
And they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless.

Again, the words of **John Calvin** are worth citing:

If we wish to understand the prophet's meaning, and to read these words with advantage, we must (as I remarked a little before) understand his design. He does not celebrate the greatness of God in a detached manner, but extols it with the utmost possible adaptation to the present subject, that Israelites may know that this shield alone is sufficient to protect them, and that they will have no reason to dread the efforts, or rage, or violence of the world, if God be reconciled to them, and that they may thus learn to betake themselves to God's protection; for if they were not fully convinced of this, there would arise at every moment various causes of despair. Isaiah thus continues the subject, when he says that all nations and peoples are nothing when compared with God; for, by simply breathing on them, he will scatter like small dust all the inhabitants of the earth. In consequence of our being excessively prone and foolishly ingenious in devising reasons of distrust, we imagine that everything that satan does for the purpose of hindering our salvation blocks up the path of God. For the purpose of correcting this error, the prophet declares that all the creatures are nothing before God, and that all the nations resemble small and inconsiderable drops of water. Hence we infer that nothing can be more contrary to reason than to exalt creatures for the sake of diminishing the power of God, which is high above all, and ought to be so acknowledged.³

We now arrive to the next section of this oracle, verses 18-20, in which we read that...

2. God is incomparable to anything the creation can create (40:18-20)

¹⁸To whom then will you liken God?
Or what likeness will you compare to Him?
¹⁹The workman molds an image,
The goldsmith overspreads it with gold,
And the silversmith casts silver chains.
²⁰Whoever is too impoverished for such a contribution
Chooses a tree that will not rot;
He seeks for himself a skillful workman
To prepare a carved image that will not totter.

The idols of idolaters are brought into view. Idols in ancient Israel, as idols everywhere in all times, were images of God whereby the idolaters believed they were able to secure the power of that God to bring blessings to them or to protect them from evil that might befall them. Idols were therefore sources of comfort for people, albeit, false comfort or false assurance for them. The prophet dispelled any notion that these idols were true sources of comfort. God is far greater in His ability to comfort than any means that

³ Ibid, p. 135.

man can devise; therefore, what is implied, is that the people of God should always resort to God with complete confidence, resting in Him.

In verse 19 the prophet speaks of the rich who attempt to fashion a god in which they can trust, and perhaps control. It is like a little doll that they dress up with gold and silver. But the poor are also idolaters at heart, as we read in verse 20. Even the poor are carried away with this madness, to think that anything but the one true and living God can provide true deliverance from sin, true comfort in enjoying God's salvation from sin. But people desire to have a god that they can control and one that will give them assurance that life will go well for them. All men are at heart idolaters, rich and poor alike. As Calvin famously said, "The human heart is an idol factory... Every one of us from our mother's womb is an expert in inventing idols."

What is the point of this refutation of idolaters? The prophet is expressing the incomprehensible, infinite nature of God. Man cannot devise or comprehend a god who even approaches the immensity, the infinity, the incomprehensibility of the true God who is our God who has promised to bring us salvation.

It is important that we remind ourselves of the incomprehensibility of our infinite God by us, who are His finite creatures. The word incomprehensible speaks of our inability to know in fully understand God and His ways because of His infinite nature and because of our finite nature. Here is an expression of the nature of our God:

The Lord our God is but one only living and true God; whose subsistence is in and of Himself, infinite in being and perfection; *whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but Himself*; a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; who is immutable, immense, eternal, *incomprehensible*...⁴

When we speak of God, *whose essence cannot be comprehended by any but Himself*, we are saying that God is incomprehensible. Are we not? And so, this attribute seems to be rather redundant in the stated confession.

Since this is the nature of our God, any and all efforts to represent Him by a visual and finite image are degrading and demeaning of our God. Every idol of God is a blasphemous representation of God, making finite and local that which represents God who is infinite and eternal.

3. God is incomparable to the creation itself (40:21-26)

The prophet next appealed to what they had been taught and had experienced in the past. **Verse 21** reads,

²¹Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

The prophet was essentially saying, "You should know better than to trust in anything or anyone or fear anything or anyone other than the true God who has revealed Himself to them. The prophet declared that they had been taught better than what they were presently exhibiting. They had been taught from the beginning, from and through the creation itself, that God is far above and beyond that which He created. Since this is so, they should readily see that God alone should be trusted to bring them comfort, that is, relief and forgiveness of their sins.

Isaiah then described God as the Sovereign Ruler of His creation in **verse 22**.

²²It is He who sits above the circle of the earth,
And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,

⁴ *The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, Article 2, Paragraph 1.

Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.

Now this verse is frequently quoted to show that the Bible teaches that the earth is round, not flat. The “circle of the earth” is the circumference of the earth, the arc of the earth itself. And this may be correct. However, the “circle of the earth” may refer to the heavens, which is likened to a great dome over the earth. God sits above looking down upon the earth that He created and controls. God from His lofty position looks upon the people of the earth from this great distance and vantage point and they are seen to be as little and insignificant grasshoppers scurrying about on the earth. God is watching and God is able to control what moves on the face of His world. God had stretched out the heavens to cover the earth as a man on earth would stretch out a tent to cover his household. God is providing His watch care and protection for His people on the earth who are dwelling under His “tent”, which are the heavens over the earth.

That God is sovereign over the people of the earth is expressed in **verses 23 and 24**:

²³He brings the princes to nothing;
He makes the judges of the earth useless.
²⁴Scarcely shall they be planted,
Scarcely shall they be sown,
Scarcely shall their stock take root in the earth,
When He will also blow on them,
And they will wither,
And the whirlwind will take them away like stubble.

As a man may govern what takes place within his own tent, so God controls all that dwells under His tent, His curtain. Even the leaders of people are as so many plants that God has planted, but whom He can remove easily with His own breath blowing upon them. Here, by the way, we have the same imagery that we saw earlier about the hot desert wind from the east off the Arabian Desert⁵ that God causes to blow across His land in order to bring His judgment, drying up the grass and withering the flowers.

And so, the prophet shows how trivial before God are those we might regard as the shapers and shakers of the affairs of the world as capable of thwarting the purpose of God. Rulers are as nothing as are judges in their ability to effect the course of events. They are actually powerless, for it is God who governs them as He does all of His creatures. He is the Sovereign Ruler of His world.

How great is He? In what way can our true God be compared to man? **Verse 25** reads,

²⁵“To whom then will you liken Me,
Or to whom shall I be equal?” says the Holy One.

Isaiah then urged his readers to lift their eyes and see the great God who made everything about us. Look at the evening sky as the stars begin to shine as the evening darkens into night.

²⁶Lift up your eyes on high,
And see who has created these things,
Who brings out their host by number;
He calls them all by name,
By the greatness of His might
And the strength of His power;
Not one is missing.

⁵ The east wind blowing on Palestine is not off the Sahara Desert, which I wrongly asserted last week, but from the Arabian Desert that is located in the east.

Here Isaiah may be likening God to a great Shepherd who leads the stars out of their fold to pasture every evening, so that they may shine forth in the heavens. Whereas a shepherd leads forth his sheep as he calls them by name and leads them forth as they follow him to their pasture, so God leads forth stars, calls them out by name every evening to shine forth in the heavens, even as He directs their course across the skies. God is in sovereign control of even the stars in their courses through the heavens.

4. God's people should not feel forsaken or forgotten, for He is able to comfort His people (40:27-31)

The prophet then draws the conclusion to all that He has been arguing. "How can you, the people of God, think yourselves forsaken and forgotten?" We read in **verse 27**,

²⁷Why do you say, O Jacob,
And speak, O Israel:
"My way is hidden from the LORD,
And my just claim is passed over by my God"?

How can you doubt God who has promised that He will save you from your sin and restore you to Himself? How can you doubt that He will enable you to escape your captivity and enable you to return through a wilderness journey to "Zion," to be joined to the people of God in the kingdom of God over which the coming Savior, the Servant of Jehovah will reign?

The prophet then rehearses the promise of God to them that He will enable them to be delivered from their exile, from under His judgment for their sin, and He will pardon them and enable their release and return unto Him. We read in **verses 28ff**:

²⁸Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The everlasting God, the LORD,
The Creator of the ends of the earth,
Neither faints nor is weary.
His understanding is unsearchable.
²⁹He gives power to the weak,
And to those who have no might He increases strength.
³⁰Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
And the young men shall utterly fall,
³¹But those who wait on the LORD
Shall renew their strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.

And yet how often do we doubt and falter! We may be easily terrified at the prospect of what fallen man might do to us, when we should be full of confident expectation of what God has promised to do for us and in us through Jesus Christ. He is the eternal God who has committed Himself to deliver us and strengthen us to complete the journey He has prescribed for us. He calls us forth from bondage and exile to return to Him and His people, traveling through the wilderness of this world unto our eternal destination our homeland. Although we might grow weary in our faith journey, our God who leads us and bears us along does not grow weary. He is never exhausted in His ability to see things clearly and direct us rightly. And our God Himself never grows weary, but He sees to it that His people do not grow weary as well, that they would fail to reach their destination. He is able to give strength to those who are weak and struggling. He enables them who are powerless to be able to stand and proceed onward. He will see to it that they will successfully transverse the course set before them. Man's strength fails easily. Even the strength of youths

falters. But God strengthens them, that is, encourages and strengthens His people. He will see to it that He brings them all safely home, not losing one through the long and difficult journey.

What then, are we to do? “Wait upon the Lord,” that is, we are to look and trust the Lord to enable us to do the things that He commands us and directs us to do. He will see to it that we will have the resolve and strength to persevere.

We will close with one more word from **John Calvin**, who is so helpful in illuminating this passage:

It is as if he had said, that the Lord will assist them, so that they shall pursue their course without any molestation. It is a figurative expression, by which he intimates that believers will always be ready to perform their duty with cheerfulness. But it will be said, “There are so many troubles which we must endure in this life; how then does he say that we shall be exempt from weariness?” I reply, believers are indeed distressed and wearied, but they are at length delivered from their distresses, and feel that they have been restored by the power of God; for it happens to them according to the saying of Paul,

“While we are troubled on every side, we are not overwhelmed; we are perplexed, but are not in despair; we suffer persecution, but are not forsaken; we are cast down, but are not destroyed.” (2 Cor. 4:8, 9.)

Let us therefore learn to flee to the Lord, who, after we have encountered many storms, will at length conduct us to the harbor; for he who hath opened up a path, and hath commanded us to advance in that course in which he hath placed us, does not intend to assist us only for a single day, and to forsake us in the middle of our course, (Phil. 1:6) but will conduct us to the goal.⁶

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 5:10)

⁶ Ibid, p. 146.