

God Renews

Isaiah 40:18-31

When we consider the message of the prophet Isaiah to the people, we first need to think about the concept of “prophet”. The book of Isaiah is part of the Old Testament in the Holy Bible but is referenced extensively in the New Testament for both its message and its messenger. What about the role of a prophet: are they purely messengers of the Lord? Of course, I agree that Isaiah delivered the information to the people of Israel that God desired of him. That was part of his job. But we don’t always recognize that the role of prophet carries so much more importance and is more than a one way communication. Isaiah was also able to carry the words of the people back to God and to portray for Him their needs and their sufferings. I also believe that, as a representative of both sides of the conversation, Isaiah was gifted with being able to see from both perspectives. He knew the people’s situation and he had insight into God’s heart.



As our lesson opens this week, Jerusalem has fallen and the people taken into captivity. God’s wrath came down on Israel and Judah as He used the Assyrians to overthrow both kingdoms. Eventually, the Assyrians were also judged and punished for their sins and the captured slaves taken to Babylon. The people prayed to the Lord but too late to be spared the consequences of their rebellion against God.

The answer they received demonstrated both God’s judgement on their sin and hope for their future as a remnant remained of those faithful to God. Should we ever doubt that God is in charge or that God has a plan? As chapter 40 begins, the punishment for their sins have been paid and the people of Israel have the chance for a new start. Just as had been prophesied, Jerusalem was destroyed and the people held captive for 70 years. Their opportunity and hope lay in redemption.

To whom would you like to be compared? How can a comparison lead to trouble: especially if it is unflattering?

Isaiah 40: 18-20 asks who we would liken to God or if there is a likeness that can be used to compare? Since Isaiah is speaking to the people living in exile in Babylon, I wonder if this message is intended as sarcasm. Isaiah is revealing the hope he has that their punishment will soon be over and that this hope is solidly anchored in them recognizing the incomparable power of God. Their punishment and exile were all prophesied and all came true demonstrating that God is in control. I believe this sarcastic or rhetorical question referencing man’s tendency to build idols for worship when God has shown them many times that His power is greater than anything they can make is precisely the

message Isaiah brings. Man was created in God's image; making any sort of graven image far inferior. Why would man worship anything other than the One who created him?

The Israelites had been living in an environment where idol worship was common practice. This behavior may have been tempting for them to emulate, perhaps in an attempt by the enslaved people to feel some degree of control over their situation. Isaiah presenting the process that is used to make these idols or images only serves to demonstrate the futility of their action. In doing so, Isaiah gives the people hope by reminding them who the one true God is and in whom they can have faith. We are reminded again that the remnant of those who kept the faith, even during their exile, though they were not excused from the punishment, persevered and were viewed by God with favor.

To what lengths would we go to feel some control over our situation? Do we bargain with God?

Continuing with his pattern of rhetorical questions, Isaiah inquires about the nature of God in Isaiah 40:21-26. He reminded them rhetorically that their very existence as a people has been tied to God's covenant with them since the beginning. The reference to the foundations of the earth and what they have been told from the beginning is Isaiah's way of pointing out that the people have no excuse for failing to recognize their creator and His power. And, by contrast, the people of the earth are like grasshoppers when viewed from God's perspective above the earth. I found it interesting that the reference is to the "circle of the earth", in case there was ever any doubt about the shape of the earth but this is also in contrast to how the earth was viewed during Isaiah's time. They saw the arc of the sun in the sky and the moon at night but did not conceive of the shape of the planet.

An interesting side note is the comparison of the people to grasshoppers. Grasshoppers are a very destructive species, particularly to crops and agriculture but they can even swarm and cause great devastation. While Isaiah may have been referencing the insignificance of man in comparison to God, I also wonder about the potential underlying reference to stewardship of the earth.



Though grasshoppers are noted pests agriculturally, they are still important in the ecosystem as they supply nutrients to the earth as well as a food source for birds, snakes, and other animals.

As Creator, God set the foundations of the earth and all the institutions of the world. He set in place the cycles of the planets, the sun and moon, and the order of the inhabitants of the world. In his power, we must recognize that He can also unmake all those things. Isaiah's purpose for noting all of this is to establish that God is in charge even when it seems that human leaders rule. All of those leaders have their season just as vegetation lasts a season before it withers and blows in the wind. In verses 25 and 26, the people are challenged to recognize who God is. They are reminded to "look up" and know that even the stars have names. It was not uncommon, even in biblical times, for constellations and stars to be named. To name something suggests dominion over it. Even these verses are recognizing that God is sovereign over the stars in the sky and sustains it all.

In Isaiah 40: 27-31 we again hear the groaning of the people over their situation. This is not unlike those in bondage in Egypt or during their time in the desert with Moses. Perhaps it is not unlike us complaining about our present situation. Their concern is that either God is blind to their suffering or he is ignoring it. They fear that God has forsaken them and His covenant with them.

Do we ever feel like God doesn't see our problems or that a situation isn't "fixed" the way we want it to be? How long do we try to handle a situation ourselves before we pray about it?



These verses again present rhetorical questions to point out the folly of their fear. Just as God did not lead the people out of Egypt to let them die in the desert, God did not forsake them in their Babylonian exile. Isaiah's job at that time was to maintain their hope. He proclaimed that God never grows weary, using even young virile men as a metaphor "for even they will grow weary": but God won't. But Isaiah was not only referring to physical weariness. He wanted to encourage the Israelites not to grow weary in their spirituality. He wanted them to expectantly wait on the Lord.

Our spiritual journey is what is most important to God. We cannot lose sight or grow weary in seeking to maintain our relationship with "The Holy One of Israel". We are to TRUST that God will not grow tired even though men do. Human strength fails every time but God's strength does not. We cannot rescue ourselves but we need to always maintain faith, and hope, and expectation that God will act in His time. We are the remnant who can hang onto our faith and persevere, even have joy in troubling times. I believe we are experiencing troubled times and I also believe, just like this final verse says, that whatever our chosen mode of travel, each one represents forward movement. Whether we ride, run, or walk we can keep moving toward the Lord.

But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.
Isaiah 40:31.