

Wednesday, May 28, 2025 | Isaiah 40: A Comforting Call

Week 2 | "Behold Your God" (Isaiah 40:9-12)

Under the breadth of God, humanity is withering grass and fading wildflowers in the heat of summer. In contrast, God's word remains; it alone is the only constant in the universe. It outlasts everything, especially human beings. **And while this may seem like bad news, it is actually good news.** Quoting from this very passage, Peter says, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the **good news** that was preached to you" (1 Pet. 1:22-35). To know the brevity of human life and the eternity of God's word is "good news." Why? **Because a hope built on the foundation of God's word, rather than man's wisdom, is hope that springs eternal.** Or, as Alistair Begg puts it, "The word of God is not simply there as the *contrast* to human brevity and fragility, but as the *cure*."

Vs. 9-11 – This is why, despite humanity's mortality, Isaiah's message is one of hope rather than despair. God addresses "O Zion" and "O Jerusalem," monikers for the nation of Israel, and he calls the country a "herald of good news" twice. The Lord tells the Israelites to "go on up to a high mountain," to "lift up your voice with strength," to "lift it up," and to "fear not." **Israel was being called to fearlessly proclaim a favorable message.** They were instructed to "say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" Rather than looking to the other gods, God would have His people look to Him. He is the only one worth any consideration.

What should Judah behold? Three things: God's ability, bounty, and geniality.

- (1) **God's Ability** – "The Lord God" is no weakling but "comes with might." He is the *Shaddai*, aka the Almighty (cf. Gen. 17:1; Ex. 6:3; Psa. 65:5-8). No one is stronger or more powerful than God. When "arm" is used metaphorically, as here, it refers to a being's or institution's might (e.g., "the long arm of the law"). God's "arm" refers to God's power being manifested on the earth (cf. Isa. 51:9). The children of Israel are called to recognize the Almighty God, whose arms are not slack but strong. He has not lost grip of reality; God's rule is absolute. Nor is he unfit to save; the reach of the Lord God is long (cf. Num. 11:23).

However, there is something curious about how this verse speaks about God's "arm." It says, "his arm rules for him," as if the "arm" were a separate entity from God yet still

connected to him. How do we make sense of this? Eventually, God's "arm" will be manifested through his "Suffering Servant" (cf. Isa. 53:1), aka Jesus Christ. God the Father has handed all authority over to God the Son (cf. Mat. 28:18; Lu. 10:22; Eph. 1:21-22). **Jesus is the Arm of the Lord.**

- (2) **God's Bounty** – All good things come from God's hand (cf. Ja. 1:17). This idea will be repeated, verbatim, in Isa. 62:11. With the Lord God, there is a 'reward' and a 'recompense.' They are 'his,' and they stand only 'before him.' No one else such rewards (cf. Psalm 21:1-7; 36:7-9). In Psalm 16:11, David says to God, 'You make known to me the path of life; in your presence, there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.' What a beautiful expression of God's abundant blessings. John Mark Comer says it best when he says,

“Ultimately, nothing in this life, apart from God, can satisfy our desires. Tragically, we continue to chase after our desires ad infinitum. The result? A chronic state of restlessness or, worse, angst, anger, anxiety, disillusionment, depression—all of which lead to a life of *hurry* [author's emphasis], a life of busyness, overload, shopping, materialism, careerism, a life of more...which in turn makes us even *more* restless. And the cycle spirals out of control.”¹

- (3) **God's Geniality** – God's relationship between him and his people is compared to that of a "shepherd" and "his flock." Specifically, a shepherd's *care* is likened to God's; it is one of tenderness and gentleness. Just as a shepherd will not abuse his sheep, so the Lord will not abuse his people. Far from it, "he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young." **The same arm of God that "rules" and the same arm of God that extends "reward" and "recompense" is the same arm of God that "gathers" his sheep.** During his blessing of Manasseh and Ephraim, Jacob addresses God as "The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day" (Gen. 48:15; cf. 49:24). And, of course, the opening lines of Psalm 23:1 are an obvious parallel: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." If the children of Israel ever wanted to understand how God interacts with them, they need only study the pastures where the shepherds care for their flock. The parallel to Jesus is evident since he famously referred to himself as the "Good Shepherd" (Jn. 10:11). In a letter to his close friend and protégé,

William Short, Thomas Jefferson said that Jesus' objective was the "reformation of some articles in the religion of the Jews, as taught by Moses," claiming that the God of the OT is "a being of terrific character, cruel, vindictive, capricious and unjust."² Although Jefferson was right about a great many things, most notably the separation of church and state, he was wrong about the distinction between the OT and the NT. The same Shepherd in the OT is the same in the NT, and he is not savage but soothing. This is why, as the Gaithers put it, we can come to the Lord singing,

*Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us
For we need You to help us find our way
Gentle Shepherd, come and feed us
For we need Your strength from day to day
There's no other we can turn to
Who can help us face another day
Gentle Shepherd, come and lead us
For we need You to help us find our way*

Vs. 12 – Verses 1-11 answer the question, "Does God want to deliver Israel," while vs. 12-31 answer the question, "Can God deliver Israel?"³ And to answer that question, Isaiah uses the rest of the chapter to "behold" God (cf. vs. 9). Vs. 12-31 is a magnificent meditation on the greatness of God.

Isaiah begins his reflection of God's grandeur by asking a series of rhetorical questions. As we'll see, these questions aim to demonstrate the vastness of God's proportions. Utilizing anthropomorphism,⁴ The prophet speaks of God's "hand" interacting with four objects: "the waters," "the heavens," "the dust," and "the mountains/hills."

(1) First, Isaiah asks, "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?"

Approximately 71% of the earth's surface is covered by water, roughly equivalent to

² "Thomas Jefferson to William Short, 4 August 1820," *Founders Online*, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-16-02-0132>, [accessed May 27, 2025].

³ Oswalt, John N., *The Book of Isaiah Chapter 40-66*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI; Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), p. 57.

⁴ Anthropomorphisms are human characteristics used to describe nonhuman objects (e.g., "the tree danced in the wind," "the storm was angry," "the flowers whispered to each other," etc.).

over 352 quintillion gallons of water.⁵ That's 352 with 18 zeros behind it. All the oceans, streams, and waterways fit comfortably in God's hand.

- (2) Isaiah asks, "[Who has] marked off the heavens with a span?" As used here, the term "heavens" refers simply to the sky (cf. Ps. 8:1, 3, 8). The Hebrew term translated as "marked off" implies an "exactness of workmanship,"⁶ showing that God has fine-tuned the universe (e.g., the fundamental constants and quantities of the universe, such as gravity, expansion, mass, and energy).⁷ Far from being the sheer product of chance, existence is the work of a highly meticulous and fastidious Being.

A "span" is a form of measurement (cf. Ex. 28:16; 39:9); it uses the distance between the tip of the thumb and the tip of the little finger as a single unit (e.g., Sovereignty, the 2025 Kentucky Derby winner, is 16.3 hands high.). Isaiah says the Lord has determined the boundaries of the sky with a single span of his hand. This is a remarkable statement, considering that space is a vast and expansive place. For example, our solar system spans a distance of approximately 3 light-years.⁸ To put that in perspective, if the Sun were the size of a soccer ball, the edge of the universe would be 17.5 miles away.⁹ As the crow flies, that's further than the distance between Grace Pointe and Camden Yards (13.51 miles). Space is so large that, according to Carl Sagan, there are more stars in the sky than there are grains of sand on the earth. Yet, despite the sheer size of the universe, Yahweh can measure it using only one hand.

- (3) Isaiah asks, "[Who has] enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure?" The term "dust" refers to dirt, gravel, ash, or any loose particle (cf. Gen. 2:7; 13:16). As with "a span," and as the name suggests, a "measure" is a form of measurement. Oswalt states that it would be "analogous to our "quart," a fourth part of a gallon."¹⁰ Literally rendered, the Hebrew word translated as "a measure" means "a third," and it referred to a "vessel

⁵ General Editors, "How much water is in the ocean?" June 16, 2024, *National Ocean Service*, <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/oceanwater.html>, [accessed May 27, 2025].

⁶ Motyer, J. Alec, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary*, (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity Press Academic, 1993), p. 303.

⁷ Craig, William Lane, "The Fine-Tuning of the Universe," June 8, 2016, *DrCraigVideos*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EE76nwimuT0>, [accessed May 28, 2025].

⁸ General Editors, "How Big Is the Solar System?" September 28, 2023, *Unistellar*, <https://www.unistellar.com/blog/how-big-is-the-solar-system/>, [accessed May 27, 2025].

⁹ Roper, Mark, "Solar System Model From a Drone's View," March 9, 2016, *Mark Roper*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pR5VJo5ifdE>, [accessed May 27, 2025].

¹⁰ Oswalt (1998), p. 56.

that contained a third of some unstated measurement."¹¹ When the LXX translates this word, it uses the Greek term *δρακί* (*draki*), which refers to an outstretched hand, indicating the amount in question would be about a handful.¹² McConville states it's the sort of "utensil" used for "measuring quantities."¹³ Thus, unlike "span," which is a ***dimensional*** measurement—i.e., the size of an object, a "measure" is a ***gravitational*** measurement—i.e., the weight of an object. As if he were using some sort of kitchen utensil while putting together a recipe, the Lord God gathers the dust, soil, and loose earth, and it amounts to nothing more than a single measuring cup.

- (4) As with "a span" and "a measure," Isaiah carries on the theme of weights and measurements by asking, "[Who has] weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?" Ask a mathematician how much Mount Everest weighs, and they'll likely give you an estimation. Ask them the weight of every mountain and hill, and they'll look at you in confusion. But ask the Lord, and he'd know the precise mass down to the last milligram. God knows the weight of every rocky peak and grassy knoll because he has put them on the "scales;" he has put them in the "balance."

The answer to these rhetorical questions is the same: *only God*. Yahweh is a transcendent being who defies all attempts at solidifying his size and weight. He is not to be measured. He is the One who measures. He is not to be weighed. He is the One who weighs. During the dedication of the Temple (cf. 1 Ki. 8:27), Solomon expressed the same idea when he said, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven, and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!" You cannot put the Lord in a box.

¹¹ Motyer (1993), p. 303.

¹² DBAG, p. 261, *δράξ, δράχός, ἡ*, "the hand spread out, *hand*."

¹³ McConville, J. Gordon, *Isaiah*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Prophetic Books, (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 2023), p. 452.

Video Description:**Isaiah 40 | Week 2 | “Behold Your God” (Isaiah 40:9-12)**

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

In today's passage, Jerusalem will be told to proclaim "good news." They instructed to say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" What follows is Isaiah's attempt to do just that. The rest of the chapter is a magnificent meditation on the greatness of God.

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