

Wednesday, June 4, 2025 | Isaiah 40: A Comforting Call

Week 3 | "A League of His Own" (Isaiah 40:13-20)

Vs. 13-14 – Isaiah moves from those things which are *measurable* (e.g., “the waters,” “the heavens,” “the dust of the earth,” “the mountains,” and “the hills”) to that which is *immeasurable*. He says, “Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD?” The Hebrew word translated as “measured” is the same term used in vs. 12, where it was translated as “marked.” Can “the Spirit of the LORD” be quantified in the same way that “the heavens” can? No. Of course not. This is quite a remarkable statement, considering that, as far as we can tell, space is ever-expanding; it is infinite. Limited as we are in our understanding of the universe, we at least know that it is boundless. But if this is true concerning the cosmos, how much more so concerning the One who created the cosmos? We cannot hope to measure God's Spirit, but the Lord undoubtedly can weigh ours (cf. Pro. 16:2).

The Lord is so unfathomable that Isaiah asks, “What man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?” These questions are direct insults to the idolatry of the time.¹ As Moyter explains,

“In Babylonian mythology, the creator god Marduk could not proceed with creation without consulting ‘Ea, the all-wise’, but the Lord works with unaided wisdom. In both Babylonian and Canaanite creation stories the creator must overcome opposing forces before the way opens for the work of creation.... [In contrast,] the Creator was alone in the work of creation; here he is alone also in the wisdom needed for the work.”²

And if God’s wisdom surpasses that of the false gods, how much more does God’s knowledge exceed that of humanity? *Finite* beings such as us do not have the capacity to make anything known to an *infinite* being such as God. What man could make known to the Knower of All Things something that he did not already know? Is there a teacher that can teach him anything? Which creature would the Creator seek advice from? Who could clear out the cobwebs of his understanding? The Lord does not need “counsel;” he is the one we should “consult” and the only one who can make us “understand.” “The path of justice,” the pursuit of “knowledge,” and “the way of understanding” are all avenues that lead to God. Every truth, however small or great, is a part of the Divine consciousness. Minerals can be mined in the earth, but wisdom can only be found in the Lord (cf. Job. 28).

¹ McConville (2023), p. 452.

² Motyer (1993), p. 303.

Considering this, we must be careful not to *minimize* God in any way, shape, or form. Job, a paradigm of faith, was scolded by the Lord for thinking that God owed him an explanation (cf. Job 38-41). Such a demand belittled God's reputation as it put the God of Job on the same level as Job. Job, realizing his mistake, said, "I know that you can do all things and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:2-6). Seeing the *greatness* of God made Job realize just how little he was. To have such a *small view* of the Lord while having such a *big view* of us is a sin. El Elyon, aka God Most High, shares his status with no one (cf. Isa. 42:8; 48:11). And any attempt to demote his station is futile. As C.S. Lewis put it, "A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word 'darkness' on the walls of his cell."³

Vs. 15 – According to the United Nations, there are 195 distinct countries in the world.⁴ However, having the ability to vote in the UN's assembly is hardly *the* definitive way to determine whether a region of the world is an officially recognized country. Case in point, the CIA acknowledges 237 fully sovereign and independent countries.⁵ Regardless, however you slice it, the point is that there are quite a few nations in existence. Collectively, those countries comprise an estimated 8.2 billion people alive today. Such a large number is hard to fathom. If each person were given a mere second of your time, it would take you nearly 260 years to meet everyone.

Yet, despite the sheer scale of the populated world, Isaiah says, "Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust." Before, the relationship between God and his people was likened to that of a shepherd and his flock (cf. vs. 11). Here, the interaction between God and the nations is likened to that of "a drop from a bucket" and "dust on the scales." In "mock astonishment,"⁶

³ Lewis, C.S., *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics: The Problem of Pain*, (New York, NY; HarperCollins Publishing, 2002), p. 577.

⁴ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "How Many Countries Are There in the World?" December 28, 2022, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/story/how-many-countries-are-there-in-the-world>, [accessed June 4, 2025].

⁵ Saunders, Toby, "How many countries are there in 2025?" December 22, 2024, *BBC: Science Focus*, <https://www.sciencefocus.com/planet-earth/how-many-countries-are-there>, [accessed June 4, 2025].

⁶ McConville (2023), p. 453.

the prophet *twice* exclaims that this is truly something to “**behold**”! Oswalt sums up the prophet’s point nicely when he says,

“Both metaphors here are powerful expressions of inconsequentiality. What are the nations—so impressive in their glory, and earthshaking in their power? They are the drop of water falling back into the cistern as the bucket is pulled up, the speck of dust on the pan of the balance scales that does not even cause the scales to flutter. Both are ephemeral and neither is cause for a moment’s notice.”⁷

Interestingly, “**coastlands**,” literally means “islands,” a term which refers to “the edges of the continents.”⁸ Are not the largest landmasses on the planet just giant islands? Isaiah is saying that the edges of the map and all that resides therein are little more than particles in the air to God. Though every kingdom, domain, or region would assert its greatness, they are so inconsequential that if their sum were weighed, they'd be but “**fine dust**.” The “**scales**” wouldn’t even register a change.⁹

Vs. 16 – “**Lebanon**” lies north of Israel. Its name means “whiteness,” a reference to the snow-capped limestone mountains which dominate its terrain. Today, the territory of Lebanon covers a total area of approximately 4,036 sq. mil., which is comparable to that of the state of Connecticut (4,845 sq. mi.). During the OT, this area became symbolic of fruitfulness and fertility due to its scenic beauty and rich vegetation.¹⁰ Its primary export, however, wasn't produce but *wood*. Lebanese Cedar is famously fragrant, decay-resistant, and insect-repellent, with a long lifespan. Solomon, like his father before him (cf. 2 Sam. 5:11), procured “cedars of Lebanon” for the construction of both the Temple and the royal palace (cf. 1 Ki. 5:6; 7:1-5). Ezra used the same wood in the construction of the Second Temple (cf. Ez. 3:7). Even today, despite deforestation, the cedar tree remains synonymous with this region, to the extent that the nation of Lebanon features a green-colored silhouette of one on its flag.

So, when Isaiah says, “**Lebanon would not suffice for fuel**,” the prophet was saying that one of the most valuable plots of land in all the world, renowned for its lumber, is nothing but an insufficient tinderbox to the Lord. Even if one were to amass all “**its beasts**,” there would not be “**enough for a [single] burnt offering**.” With one exception (cf. Isa. 53:4-5; Heb. 10:1-18), no

⁷ Oswalt (1998), p. 61.

⁸ Motyer (1993), p. 304, “How can the *dust* [author’s emphasis] wiped from a *scales* [author’s emphasis] influence him who lifts *islands as though they were fine dust* [author’s emphasis]?”

⁹ McConville (2023), p. 453, “The litany culminates in a scathing picture of utter negligibility... This meaningless emptiness is the antithesis of Yahweh’s purpose in creation (45:29; 44:9); when it is predicated here of the nations it implies a world estranged from its maker (cf. also 34:11).”

¹⁰ Youngblood, Ronald F., *Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, New and Enhanced Edition, (Nashville, TN; HarperCollins, 2014), p. 683.

offering could ever truly satisfy the Lord's righteousness or appease his wrath. Burn every tree and sacrifice every animal on the planet, and you'd still need more.¹¹ Unlike the false gods of the time, the true God was not dependent on the offerings of people to survive.¹² Even if he was, the Lord wouldn't need human beings; he could provide for himself (cf. Psa. 50:10-12).

Vs. 17 – The thought of this verse is parallel to that of vs. 15, where the prophet said the nations "are accounted as the dust on the scales." Here, Isaiah has abandoned all poetic language and speaks as plainly as possible without resorting to metaphor, simile, or analogy. All the kingdoms of this world are regarded as "nothing," "less than nothing," and utter "emptiness." This, of course, does not mean the Lord thinks human beings have no value whatsoever (cf. Isa. 2:2-4; 11:10; 19:23-25; 25:6-8; esp. Psa. 8).¹³ Isaiah does not say "by him," but "before [emphasis added] him."¹⁴ In other words, this is a *comparative* statement; it establishes *rank*, not *value*. In other words, when humanity and divinity are put on the scales, the result is overwhelmingly in God's favor. Yahweh is in a league of his own.

Vs. 18-20 – Yahweh is in a league of his own. This prompts Isaiah to ask, "To whom then will you liken God?" Among all created beings, whose image would you use as a comparison to the uncreated and invisible One? What could you possibly use to represent a being who cannot be totally defined? Considering the Lord's transcendent nature—i.e., He who defies all measurements, who needs no consultation, and whose glory robs the nations of their prestige—"what likeness" would use to "compare with him?" Despite the difficulty implied in such questions, Isaiah says his countrymen have an answer. They've chosen "An idol!" Of all the options, some are better than others, but without a doubt, an idol is the worst of them all!

Why? Using deep sarcasm, Isaiah explains, "A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains." Idols are the handiwork of a tradesman who uses substances found in the earth, adorning it with precious metals. If someone is too poor to afford things like "gold" or "silver" for the creation of their god, the "craftsman" uses "wood that will not rot." Nothing but the highest quality of lumber for this god! The worshipper wouldn't want to offend his created deity, you know? This is why the "craftsman" must be a "skillful" artisan

¹¹ Oswalt (1998), p. 61, explains that Lebanon is a synecdoche for the world, saying, "The smallness of Lebanon stands for the smallness of the whole world compared to God."

¹² Grogan, Geoffrey W., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Revised Edition, Volume 6, Proverbs through Isaiah, Longman III, Tremper & David E. Garland, General Editors, (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan Academic, 2008), p. 726, "This passage implies the consummate ease of Yahweh's control of history as well as of nature. He had given a sacrificial system but was not, like Babylon's deities, tied to it; for the most impressive forestland known to the Near East was inadequate to furnish fuel or sacrificial animals for a worthy offering to him."

¹³ Oswalt (1998), p. 62

¹⁴ Motyer (1993), p. 304

and not a novice. Only the very best must be employed to make a god. Otherwise, it's bound to topple over! A skilled handyman ensures "that [an idol] will not move."

Isaiah's point is obvious. What's the sense in worshipping a being you can purchase at the store? Is it sane to bow down before something you dug out of the ground? Why put your hopes in being that is bolted to the floor?! Such a god is utterly incomparable to the uncreated Creator of the universe! No craftsman can cast Him in gold or silver. No artisan can shape Him from wood. No handyman can pin Him down.

Video Description:

Isaiah 40 | Week 3 | “A League of His Own” (Isaiah 40:13-20)

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

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Pastor's Manuscript:

Grace Pointe Baptist Church

12029 Eastern Ave.

Baltimore, MD 21220

Contact: info@GracePointeLife.com

Website: <https://www.gracepointelife.com>

Give here: <https://www.gracepointelife.com/give/>

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