

Wednesday, June 11, 2025 | Isaiah 40: A Comforting Call

Week 4 | “Strength Renewed” (Isaiah 40:21-31)

Vs. 21-23 – The nations worshipped idols because they did not know the Lord as the Jews did. Unlike the Israelites, God had not entered into a covenant relationship with the gentile world, revealing his divine nature to them. This is partly why the Jews’ idolatry was so abhorrent: *they were supposed to know better!* Isaiah draws attention to this *inexplicable* ignorance by asking his countrymen four rhetorical questions: “Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?” Yes, they did *know*. Yes, they had *heard*. Yes, they had been *told*. And, yes, they did *understand*. The issue here is not their ability to process information; it is whether or not that knowledge will impact their lives.

The Jews were familiar with the ancient stories in which God demonstrated that he was greater than the deities of the Egyptians.¹ No idol made by human hands could ever do the God of gods justice (cf. Deut. 10:17). Additionally, the nation of Israel had been entrusted with the Book of Genesis, aka the Book of *Beginnings*. They knew how reality came into existence. They were privy to the origin of the universe! Foreign nations had their own false creation narratives (e.g., the Enuma Elish from Babylon, the Epic of Gilgamesh from Mesopotamia, etc.). But the Israelites knew, since the “foundations of the earth,” that it was Yahweh who laid the bedrock of the planet (Isa. 48:13; 51:13, 16; cf. Job 38:4; Psa. 102:25; Pro. 8:29). Yet, despite the revelation given to them, the Jews were just as bad as their unbelieving neighbors.

Using three statements, Isaiah once again (vs. 12-17) illustrates God’s transcendence:

- (1) **Global enthronement.** Isaiah says, “It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.” As has been the case throughout this chapter, the prophet is using *poetic* language. Interpreting these words literally would contradict the

¹ The first plague, turning the Nile into blood (cf. Ex. 7:14-25), demonstrated God’s supremacy over the Egyptian river gods, Hapi, Khnum, and/or Osiris. The second plague, infesting the land with frogs (cf. Ex. 8:1-15), robbed the frog-headed god, Heket, of her power. The god of the earth, Geb, was thoroughly humiliated by the third plague of lice (cf. Ex. 8:16-19). The fourth plague of flies (Ex. 8:20-32) showed the Lord’s preeminence over the fly-headed god, Khepri. The cow-headed god, Hathor, could not prevent the fifth plague in which God struck the cattle with a disease (cf. Ex. 9:1-7). The goddess of medicine and peace, Isis, couldn’t prevent the sixth plague of boils (cf. Ex. 9:8-12). The hail of the seventh plague showed that Nut, goddess of the sky, had no actual power over the heavens (cf. Ex. 9:13-35). Seth, the Egyptian god of storms and disorder, was himself thrown into chaos when locusts decimated the land during the eighth plague (cf. Ex. 10:1-20). The ninth plague, in which God threw the land of Egypt into darkness, dethroned the gods of the sun, Ra, and the moon, Thoth. And, lastly, Pharaoh, who was considered a demigod by his subjects, was robbed of his supposed divinity with the death of the firstborn during the tenth plague (cf. Ex. 11:1-12:36).

author's intent and lead to erroneous beliefs (e.g., flat-earthism). Saying that God “sits” is an anthropomorphism (see notes vs. 9-11). As a spirit (cf. Jn. 4:24), the Lord does not rest in a chair as a human being might. Such language describes God's *royal stature*—i.e., his enthronement (cf. Psa. 29:10). Additionally, heaven is not, strictly speaking, “above” us, as if it existed at a specific elevation. To talk about anything or anyone as being overhead conveys the idea of *superiority* (cf. Psa. 97:10). When Isaiah uses a phrase like “the circle of the earth,” he does *not* mean to say that the earth is a flat round disk.² Instead, the phrase either refers to the space between the earth and the sky, what Eliphaz calls the “vault of heaven” (Job 22:14), or Isaiah is talking about the horizon as if it were the borders of God's realm (cf. Josh. 15:10; Job 26:10; Pro. 8:27).³ Of the two, the former seems to fit Isaiah's emphasis on God's loftiness—i.e., the Lord's throne is established over and above the atmosphere. To say the earth's “inhabitants are like grasshoppers” does *not* mean that human beings are actual plant-eating orthopterous insects. Isaiah's point is that, in the stratum of reality, God is highly exalted, and humanity is little better than bugs (cf. Num. 13:33; Job 25:6; Isa. 41:14).

- (2) **Universal management.** Isaiah says, “[It is he] who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in.” The Hebrew term translated as “curtain” refers to a gossamer material.⁴ As wide and as vast as the sky may be, it is but a thin sheet to the Lord. God's abode is the whole of the observable universe. He is so enormous that galaxies, *plural*, are required for his dwelling. In one hand, he holds Andromeda, and with the other, he grasps the Milky Way, stretching out space as if it were nothing but a pop-up “tent.”
- (3) **Judicial enforcement.** Isaiah says, “[It is he] who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.” “Princes,” “rulers,” kings, and presidents are prone to self-aggrandizement. The pharaohs, seeking to immortalize themselves, built the pyramids. The Cult of the Emperor was the state religion in ancient Rome, wherein the emperors were worshipped as demigods. But who are these in comparison to the Supreme Judge of heaven and earth? The authority they have isn't truly theirs in the first place; it has been given to them (cf. Jn. 19:10-11). And that power can easily be taken away. God brings the nation's leaders “to nothing,” making their bloated egos “as

² Oswalt (1998), p. 66-67.

³ Motyer (1993), p. 306, “The circle is either the heavens or the horizon, both of which are circular to the observer's eye.

⁴ Oswalt (1998), p. 67.

emptiness.” This thought is parallel to vs. 17, where the prophet said, “All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.” Though monarchs tout their own greatness and countries celebrate themselves, they are nobodies! Should he desire, the Lord can rob even the most powerful person on the planet of his mental faculties, causing him to eat grass like cattle (cf. Dan. 4:28-33).

Vs. 24 – Isaiah likens the world’s leaders to a bunch of plants. He says, “Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth.” How soon are kings swept away! A sovereign is hardly established before he’s gone. King Louis XIX holds the world record as the shortest-reigning monarch in history, ruling for a mere twenty minutes.⁵ How quickly nations rise and fall! A country is no sooner instituted before it vanishes. Famously, the great empire of Babylon fell to Cyrus the Great and the Persian empire in a *single* night. They all “whither” before the breath of God (cf. vs. 7). As “the tempest” carries away “stubble,” so the Lord “blows” away the mightiest of kings. They are but chaff before the Divine wind.

Vs. 25-26 – In light of his grandeur, the Almighty asks a rhetorical question, “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him?” No ruler could be God’s equal. Any comparison would fall woefully short. After all, the Lord is the “the Holy One.” To speak of God’s *holiness* does not only refer to his *blamelessness*; it also indicates his *otherness*.⁶ The Holy One is wholly separate from everything and everyone (cf. Isa. 6:3).

God invites his people to “Lift up [their] eyes on high and see.” He wants them to gaze up at the night sky, paying particularly close attention to the stars. The Lord then asks, “Who created these?” The answer is obvious: “In the beginning, God created the heavens” (Gen. 1:1). The Babylonians were obsessed with worshipping celestial bodies.⁷ The sun, moon, and stars so captivated their attention they thought they were gods. Yet, despite their magnificence, they too were created (cf. Psa. 8:3; 19:1; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). This passage demystifies the mythology surrounding astral worship, aka astrolatry, and, as in other passages (cf. Deut. 4:19; 18:10-14; 2 Ki. 17:16), this verse condemns the practice. Constellations are no more divine than human beings, and any belief that espouses otherwise is idolatry (e.g., astrology, horoscopes, the zodiac, etc.).⁸

⁵ General Editors, “Shortest reign of a monarch,” Guinness Book of World Records, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/shortest-reign-of-a-monarch>, [accessed June 11, 2025].

⁶ Oswalt (1998), p. 69.

⁷ Grogan (2008), p. 726.

⁸ In Isaiah 47:13-14, God condemns Babylonian astrologers.

Astronomers estimate that the universe contains around one septillion stars—that's the number one, followed by *twenty-four* zeros.⁹ However, the best we can do is provide a *rough* estimate. The Lord, on the other hand, “*brings out their host by number, calling them all by name.*” “*Host*” is a military term. As if he were a general, the Lord musters his starry troops.¹⁰ And he knows *precisely* how many of his soldiers there are in the cosmos. He has even named each one (cf. Ps. 147:4).¹¹ And though the sheer quantity of these celestial bodies is enormous, it is not so monumental that God is in danger of misplacing them. He is *omniscient* and *personable*. He not only knows *all* things, but he also knows *each* thing.

God is also *omnipotent* and *unimpeachable*. He not only can do anything, but all that he does is without mistake. So staggering is “*his might*” and so “*strong*” is he “*in power*” that “*not one [star] is missing.*” The energy of a supernova or the force of a black hole are trifles next to the potency and capacity of the Almighty. No celestial light can outshine him, no sun can outlast him, and no star can outclass him. Or, as A.W. Tozer put it,

“Since He has at His command all the power in the universe, the Lord God omnipotent can do anything as easily as anything else. All His acts are done without effort. He expends no energy that must be replenished. His self-sufficiency makes it unnecessary for Him to look outside of Himself for a renewal of strength. All the power required to do all that He wills to do lies in undiminished fullness in His own infinite being.”

Vs. 27-28 – So, observing the night sky has produced *two* great theological truths. First, there is no end to God’s knowledge. He knows how many stars there are in the universe and has even given each one a name. And second, there is no end to God’s power. So great is his strength that not *one* star is lost or overlooked. If these two principles are true, then “*Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD?”*” The Jews thought that God was not watching over them anymore; they maintained that they were being ignored.

Additionally, they said, “*My right is disregarded by my God.*” The Israelites believed that the Lord had dismissed them; they insisted that, though they claimed him as their God, he had stripped them of their status. The people felt that they were being neglected and had been disinherited.

In response to the Jew’s despair, Isaiah says, “*Have you not known? Have you not heard?*” What they needed was not new information; it was to *revisit* the things they once knew and to *rehearse* the things they'd heard before. They had to *review* the old truths which have been

⁹ General Editors, “Star Basics,” NASA, <https://science.nasa.gov/universe/stars/>, [accessed June 11, 2025].

¹⁰ Oswalt (1998), p. 70.

¹¹ Motyer (1993), p. 306, “God’s directive management is not only of the totality but of the individual.”

forgotten. The prophet says, “The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” In their despondency, God’s people had lost sight of God’s unfathomable nature. They had forgotten that the Lord is an eternal being without a beginning or an ending. And they failed to remember that God is not a part of creation; he is “the Creator.” Thus, time and space are the products of his transcendent hand. His strength is so unlimited, “He does not faint or grow weary.” And “his understanding is [so] unsearchable” that he does not blank or get confused.

Vs. 29 – The same, however, cannot be said for humanity. All of us are born with weak constitutions. Give it enough time, and eventually, we'll collapse. But when we falter, God can revitalize us. Isaiah says the Lord “gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.” If dependence is a prerequisite for following God (which it undoubtedly is), then *weakness* is an *advantage* (cf. 2 Cor. 12:9). The one who knows they are weak will rely on someone else's strength. Just as the one who knows they are foolish will not look to themselves for wisdom. Such humility is the key that unlocks heavenly “power” and “strength.”

Vs. 30-31 – Let not the young person say their spirits will never slacken, for Isaiah insists that “even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted.” Physical vitality is transient; it has its limits. In contrast, “they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength.” From God's presence, there are ever-flowing waters of renewal. Those who come to him will find that he has strength enough spare. But we mustn't think that God will abide by our timetable. He doesn't “wait” on us; we wait for him. We are entirely at the mercy of his timing and not our own. This waiting is not apathetic inactivity but *active* inactivity. Those who “wait for the LORD” do so confidently, *anticipating* that, eventually, God will act. It is eagerly refusing to move until God has moved.

And whenever God does move, those who trust him “shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.” Instead of being crushed by the weight of this world, a person relying on God will *soar*. Rather than stumbling through life’s obstacles, he who counts on the Lord will *sprint*. In the place of halted steps, she who depends on Yahweh will *saunter*.

Video Description:

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SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

God is transcendent. Nothing and no one can compare to him. He is more unfathomable than we could ever possibly imagine. This otherness does not mean he is heartless. The Holy One cares for us. So much so that should we falter, he will catch us. Should we faint, he will pick us back up. Should we fail, he will renew our strength. But to experience God’s power, we must be willing to wait on him. This waiting is not pathetic inactivity but *active* inactivity; it is eagerly refusing to move until God has moved.

For those who are patient enough to wait on the Lord, the rewards are a wonder. Instead of being crushed by the weight of this world, a person relying on God will *soar*. Rather than stumbling through life’s obstacles, he who counts on the Lord will *sprint*. In the place of halted steps, she who depends on Yahweh will *saunter*.

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