

Isaiah 40 Part 2 Handout

Last week we covered the first 11 verses of chapter 40. These verses marked a dramatic shift in the book of Isaiah from judgment to comfort. It proclaimed the end of Israel's exile, that their sin had been pardoned and revealed God as a triumphant returning King and a tender Shepherd leading his flock. However, announcing comfort and being *able* to deliver it are two different things. If someone tells you 'it's going to be 'okay' but you doubt they actually have the power to make it okay, the words ring hollow. That's exactly where Judah is. They're in exile — and Babylon looks unstoppable. So before Isaiah lets the people rest in that comfort, he answers the question: *is God actually big enough to back up this promise?*

Verses 12-14

Isaiah asks who has measured the entire physical universe using their hand. God can measure all the waters of the earth in the cup of His palm and the heavens by the breadth of his hand. He doesn't even have to use two hands to do this, only one! He can hold all the dust of the earth in a basket. He can weigh the mountains and hills on a scale. All of this is to say that God doesn't struggle to maintain the universe. He holds it all effortlessly in the palm of His hand.

So, imagine yourself standing on the beach and looking out at the ocean. It feels overwhelmingly massive to us. But God can contain it all in the palm of His hand. Isaiah's point here to the exiles and to us today is that if God can hold the ocean in His palm, He can easily hold our life, our crisis, our future in His hand as well. It won't overwhelm or unsettle Him. He holds it all with calm assurance.

Look at verse 13: Who can fathom the Spirit of the Lord or instruct the Lord as His counselor? The word fathom in Hebrew (takan) translates to a word that means to measure, weigh, or regulate. It's actually the same word used in verse 12 where God is pictured weighing the mountains on a scale. So, Isaiah takes the very verb used for God measuring the mountains and flips it around in verse 13 to ask, "well, who's going to measure Him?"

Notice what's being measured. **What is it?** _____

The word used here is ruach, the same Hebrew word that can mean wind, breath or spirit. Depending on what translation you have, you might see this translated 'Spirit' or 'mind'. They are two ways of capturing the same underlying idea: God's own inner being, His purposes, His way of thinking. Either way you translate it, the question lands the same: who could possibly take God's mind and Spirit, measure it, regulate it, or fully grasp it? Of course the answer is nobody. His mind, wisdom and plans are far too vast for any human being to comprehend.

At this time in the world, kings relied heavily on councils of wise advisors to make decisions. In the second half of verse 13 and verse 14, Isaiah is asking if anyone has given God advice or taught Him a lesson. Of course the answer is no one. He is the sole creator and is entirely self-sufficient. This should have been a huge comfort to the exiles and should be to us as well. God's plans don't depend on human strategy or political alliances. He is capable of carrying out His plans no matter how strong the opposition.

Verses 15-17

What are the nations like according to verse 15? _____

Losing a drop of water from a bucket is completely negligible. It doesn't change the weight of the bucket of water. The point here is that the most intimidating human empires (like Babylon) are an inconsequential drop to the Lord Almighty.

What are they regarded as? _____

The same is true here. A speck of dust settling on one side of the scale will have absolutely no effect. This shows how human power, political alliances and military might carry no weight in the grand scheme of God's divine plan.

What does it say He weighs the islands as though they were? _____

Islands in Hebrew (iyyim) refers to the most distant lands, coastlands and remote nations known in the ancient world. To the people of Israel the 'islands' would have represented the maritime regions of the Mediterranean Sea. It essentially meant 'the ends of the earth' or the absolute outer boundaries of the known map at that time. These empires would have felt overwhelming and permanent to the exiled Israelites. To them, these coastland or island empires were massive and unmovable. To God, entire continents and far off civilizations carry no more weight than a speck of dust floating in the air. To Him, lifting or shifting the nations is like effortlessly blowing fine dust off a table.

With these three metaphors, God is showing the people that Babylon may seem unstoppable, but He is far greater. According to the Lord they are too small to even register for Him.

Verse 16 refers to Lebanon. If you remember, Lebanon was famous for its massive, dense forests of cedar trees and abundant wildlife. Isaiah is saying that even if you chopped down every tree in Lebanon and sacrificed all the wildlife living there it would never match His worth. It would still fall short of being 'sufficient' for God.

Isaiah gives a summary of his entire argument about human power and global empires in verse 17.

How do the nations compare to God?

_____ — _____ — _____
He starts with the word 'nothing' and subtracts from it. Compared to God, the superpower keeping them in exile equals a negative number.

Isaiah is working to build a bridge for his audience. If the physical universe is just a handful of dust to God (vs.12), if no human mind can outwit Him (vs.13-14), and if the greatest empires of the earth are simply a drop of water in a bucket to Him (vs.15-17), then Babylon is not a permanent prison. God is more than capable of bringing His people back home.

So think about everything we've just seen — God can't be measured in the hollow of a hand, mountains can't be weighed against Him, even the entire forest of Lebanon with all its wildlife isn't a big enough offering to match Him. That's the first thing this chapter is doing: stripping away any way to measure God. Now watch what happens next — Isaiah moves from measurement to comparison."

Verses 18-20

Verse 18 acts as the thesis statement for the entire section by asking, *“With whom then will you compare God? To what image will you liken him?”* The exiles’ thinking and faith are being challenged here. God is completely outside and above the created universe (transcendent). What physical object could possibly represent Him? This exposes the logical flaw of idolatry. Any attempt to put the limitless God inside a physical, limited object is impossible.

In verses 19-20 we are shown the manufacturing process of making an idol—

- Metalworker casts it
- Goldsmith overlays it with gold
- Silver chains are fashioned for it

Even a poor person has an idol made—

- Select wood that won’t rot
- Finds a skilled worker
- Makes an idol that won’t topple

What we see here is that both the rich and the poor invest time, money and labor into their idols. They want a god they can see, touch and manipulate. We actually get an unspoken punchline here: A god who has to be stabilized so it doesn’t fall down is not a serious answer to the previous question.

Unlike other gods who are a personalization and extension of their nation, the God of Israel was transcendent over and independent of the nation of Israel. Pagan gods were bound up with their nation’s fate. They were co-dependent. The god needed the nation’s offerings and cult to function and the nation needed the god’s protection to survive. The two could not be separated. A god’s power was often understood as expressed through and dependent on that nation’s success. If the nation fell, the assumption was that the god had been defeated or had abandoned them.

It is not the same with the God of Israel. He is uncreated, existing entirely outside of time, matter and space. He spoke the entire universe into existence and claims ownership over the entire cosmos.

And that difference isn’t just theological trivia — it’s the whole reason Israel could hope in exile. Ancient gods in the end are just lifeless objects that can do nothing for the people who worship them, whereas the God of Israel can and will save His people both now and forever.

So notice what we just walked through — Isaiah asks who God can be compared to, then shows us exactly what happens when people try: they end up carving wood and casting metal, building a god they can control. That’s the second thing this chapter strips away — the ability to compare God to anything. We’ll see this same question come back again in a few verses.

Verses 21-24

Verse 21 is sharp and convicting. It kind of sounds like an exasperated parent speaking to their child who should already know the answer but has forgotten it in the midst of panic.

- Do you not know?
- Have you not heard?
- Has it not been told to you from the beginning?
- Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

The people of Israel are looking at the massive walls of Babylon and wondering whether God was actually capable of saving them. God is reminding them by asking these questions that the sheer existence of the cosmos testifies to a supreme Creator – Himself. This is likely pointing back to Israel's own core story – creation itself, God's calling of Abraham, the exodus – all the ways God has proven Himself faithful in the past.

Verse 21 shows us that human anxiety often stems from a flawed memory. When circumstances become overwhelming, we can shrink God down to the size of our problems rather than remembering who He truly is and what He's capable of.

What's something you know about God's character that you tend to forget exactly when you need it most? _____

Right after the sharp rebuke of verse 21, God provides a massive visual that bridges the gap between the physical reality of what the exiles can see with their eyes to the truth seen when the camera lens is zoomed out to see things from God's vantage point.

Where is God seated? _____

What are its people like? _____

God is so great that people are as small and insignificant as grasshoppers in comparison and the vast expanse of the cosmos is stretched out like a tent to live in.

What does it say God does with princes and rulers? _____

Verse 23 plainly tells us that 'He reduces rulers to nothing.' Verse 24 shows us how fast this takes place – barely planted, barely rooted, and then God just blows on them and they are swept away. Political power crumbles instantly before divine will. This verse really emphasizes the transcendence of God.

Verses 21-24 underline the absolute supremacy of God over human history and politics. They show us that God is not contained by the empires He made. He entirely transcends them. This in turn serves as a call against despair to the people living in exile, assuring them that there is no authority that can thwart the eternal purposes of God.

Verses 25-26

Verse 25 seems to close out the theme of God's global superiority. Here it is again — the same comparison question from verse 18, but this time God asks it himself. Notice that unlike in verse 18 where the prophet asks the questions, this time it is God Himself (the Holy One). Holiness in Hebrew means absolute, unique set apartness. God is reminding the people that He cannot be boxed in by human limitations. He has no rivals. Nothing and no one compares to Him. These two verses also serve to set up the rest of the chapter that offers intimate comfort to the weary exiles.

What does verse 26 call the people to do? _____

God's reminding them of who made the stars in the first place. He did! He's the one who calls out the stars by name. It is because of His strength that none are missing. Isaiah is using the stars to comfort God's people. If God has the power to manage, name and sustain every star without losing track of a single one, how could He lose track of His people in exile?

Here's an interesting side note: The Babylonians worshipped the stars and planets, seeing them as divine beings. They believed that the celestial bodies actually were the gods, moving across the sky and communicating divine will. Their most powerful gods were Marduk (Jupiter) and Ishtar (Venus) who they saw as ruling over human destiny. But who created them? They were worshipping the creation rather than the creator. It is the hand of God that holds them in place.

So here's the third thing this chapter's done. We've seen God can't be measured, can't be compared — and now, instead of us naming or defining Him, we find out He's the one doing the naming of every single star. He's not located by anything outside Himself; everything else is located by Him.

Verses 27-31

These verses address the exiles' despair by confronting their complaint that God has abandoned them.

What is the mindset of the people in verse 27? _____

This is a cry of abandonment born from Babylonian captivity.

Isaiah spends the last few verses addressing the people's claims by responding with four foundational truths to correct their skewed perspective.

Verse 28 starts the same way verse 21 did – Do you not know? Have you not heard?

- **Truth #1:** The Lord is the everlasting God. He is not bound by human timelines. He is eternal.
- **Truth #2:** God is Creator - of the ends of the earth. This means that nothing is outside of His authority, care or control. He retains absolute sovereignty and ownership over all things.
- **Truth #3:** God will not grow tired or weary. God never loses focus, gets exhausted or needs rest. He has unlimited, self-sustaining strength that never drains.
- **Truth #4:** No one can fathom His understanding. He is all-wise and no human can fathom His strategies or timing. However, His plans can be trusted even when we cannot fully understand.

We learn two things about God in verse 29:

- He gives strength to the tired and weary
- He increases the power of the weak

This shows us that God doesn't keep His power to Himself. Instead, He infuses us with it. In verse 30 Isaiah points to the person in peak physical shape - those that are young and young men.

What does he say about them? _____

Listen to the first part of verse 31 again - "but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength."

There are two key words in this verse:

- Hope
- Renew

Let's look at the word hope first. Other translations use the word 'wait' here.

In Hebrew, Tikvah (teek-vah) is the noun for 'hope'. Kavah (kah-VAH) in Hebrew is the verb from which Tikvah derives which means 'to wait' or 'to bind together' like weaving individual strands into a thick, unbreakable rope capable of holding a heavy load securely. Together, they represent hope, not as wishful thinking, but as an active, binding trust in God. It means moving away from passive, anxious wishing and moving toward active alignment with God while your circumstances remain unchanged.

The word 'renew' comes from the Hebrew verb chalaph (kha-laf). Here it means more than simply recharging or starting over. It literally means 'to pass through', 'to change' or 'to exchange'. This implies that those who wait on the Lord don't just get a little energy boost. They 'exchange' their depleted, exhausted human strength for God's divine strength in return.

Why do you think God often allows us to reach the end of our own strength before He steps in to renew us?

The end of verse 31 shows us what this hope and renewal look like in three forms of endurance:

- The Crisis - *Soaring on wings like eagles* - rising above our circumstances, challenges and storms of life and gaining a fresh, higher perspective. We can transcend difficulties by relying on God.

Something interesting I came across when I was preparing this study is that eagles rarely flap their wings. They are built for soaring rather than flapping. They have a massive wingspan that takes a tremendous amount of energy to power, so they rarely flap. What they do instead is find columns of rising warm air, lock their wings, and let the wind lift them. This allows them to conserve energy as well as glide great distances.

So when we hope or wait on the Lord, it is like allowing God's Spirit to lift us to soar above our circumstances rather than flapping furiously in our own strength.

- The Season - *Run and not grow weary* - those busy, high-energy seasons of life. Here, God gives us energy and motivation to move forward wherever we are in life with the stamina to keep pace without burning out.
- The Daily Grind - *Walk and not be faint* - the daily perseverance of the day-to-day grind of putting one foot in front of the other without losing heart or giving up.

When our lives are intertwined with God, His strength carries our load, allowing us to soar, run or walk without fainting.

Why is "walking without fainting" sometimes a greater miracle than soaring like an eagle?

This chapter moved from an intimate whisper of comfort to a cosmic display of supreme power ending in a deeply personal promise of endurance. It takes a community of people living in despair and dismantles their fears so they can find the strength they need to walk into the future God has for them.

And that brings us to the fourth and final thing this chapter leaves us with. God can't be measured, can't be compared, and He's the one who names everything rather than being named. So what's left for us to do? Not mastery. Not figuring Him out. Just waiting — trusting him while our circumstances stay the same. That's exactly what verse 31 promises: those who wait on Him find their strength renewed.

So if we step back and look at the whole shape of what we just covered: measurement, comparison, naming, waiting. Each one strips away another way we might try to get a handle on God — until all that's left is trust.

Three overarching truths from Isaiah 40:

- ❖ The comfort of God (vs.1-11)
- ❖ The greatness of God (vs.12-26)
- ❖ The strength of God (vs.27-31)

Because God is incomparably great, He is completely trustworthy; and because He is completely trustworthy, we can safely rest our weariness in His strength.

For the exiles in Babylon at this time, these words would have been so comforting. Not only had they been in captivity for 70 years, but delivery from that exile meant a long, exhausting journey (approximately 900 miles) taking months to walk back to Jerusalem. God promises the strength and stamina to make it all the way home.

What does that 'hope' practically look like in our lives - to actively trust in God; to align ourselves with Him even while our circumstances remain unchanged.

Here are four daily habits focused on shifting that can help us do this:

1. Mindset Shift - the exchange of control

- a. We tend to mentally replay the worst case scenarios, try to force a door to open, or manipulate a situation to get a fast outcome.
- b. The shift comes when we intentionally go to God and say, "God, I can't control this outcome, but I trust your character." This means that we do what we can – ex. Apply for jobs, go to the doctor appointment, parent your kids, etc), but we leave the timing and final results entirely in God's hands.
- c. When fear or anxiety grabs a hold of you, physically open your hands palm-up to symbolize releasing control of that specific problem to God.
- d. Some verses to look at: Psalm 37:5–7; Proverbs 3:5–6; 1 Peter 5:7

2. Focus Shift – Shift from “Why” to “Who”

- a. We tend to hyper-focus on our problems. We may ask, ‘Why is this happening?’ or ‘When will this end?’
- b. The shift comes when you intentionally starve your worries and feed your faith. Instead of focusing on the problem, you focus on who God is.
- c. Read passages of scripture that highlight God’s attributes (He is faithful, He is good, He is always with me) and read them when you feel tempted to give in to fear, anxiety and despair.
- d. Some verses to look at: Psalm 27:13–14; Lamentations 3:22–24; Colossians 3:2

3. Action Shift – Faithful Plodding

- a. We get consumed by what we are waiting for, so we freeze up, spiral down or stop doing everyday things.
- b. The shift comes when you focus on doing the next right thing, or taking the next right step. Waiting on God means being faithful in the mundane, quiet seasons. This means continuing to serve others, show up to work, love your family and friends well, etc.
- c. This might mean asking yourself, “What is the single most faithful thing I can do in the next hour?” Do that and leave the future to God.
- d. Some verses to look at: Galatians 6:9; Psalm 37:3; Luke 16:10a

4. Communication Shift – Anchored Prayer

- a. Sometimes we can treat God like a vending machine, asking Him to change our circumstances and then walk away frustrated when nothing happens.
- b. The shift comes when you use prayer to anchor your soul to Him. It’s okay to be honest and tell Him that you’re tired, angry or confused, but then end your prayer by anchoring yourself to His promises.
- c. Pray the “Even If” prayer – “God, I am exhausted and I really want this situation to change or be resolved. But **even if** it doesn’t, I know You are still my strength and I choose to trust and rest in You.”
- d. Some verses to look at: Philippians 4:6–7; Habakkuk 3:17–18; Romans 8:26

Do these four habits make sense to you? **What one do you think would be the most helpful for you right now in your life?**

Write down your biggest 'mountain' or worry on one side of the piece of paper, and then write down the specific attribute of God from Isaiah 40 that overrules that worry on the other side?