

## My Favorite Chapter (part 2)

Isaiah 40:21-31

As I said last week, this really is my favorite chapter in the Bible, and it has been since I was a teenager. I have always appreciated the encouragement that we will see at the end of the chapter, and I have always grasped the connection between that encouragement and the humility to which we are called in our lives as human beings.

There are a lot of things in life that don't go right. That's what keeps us humble. This past week, I was asked several times rather personally, "How was your week?" And my answer was, "Normal." I like normal weeks, which basically means that my labors for the church are pretty evenly divided between personal involvement with people and time spent in the office. "Normal" means those two things are well balanced with nothing extraordinary requiring or demanding a huge chunk of my time or energy. I can extend that to my home and family life as well.

Yet even in a normal week, I could identify stresses. Struggles to endure. Obstacles to overcome. And a real measure of unexpected intrusions into the ordinary course of daily life. I certainly had that this week as well, and though I won't itemize those for you, they are inescapable. And real. Some weeks, they are dominant. Some weeks nothing is "normal" at all, either because of time commitments or unusual duties or struggles.

That's true for seasons of life, too. The bulk of my first two years here was anything but normal, because most weeks I travelled back to Atlanta, either to be with my family or to attend to the responsibilities of getting our house there ready to sell. The whole context certainly wasn't normal, either, with the circumstances by which I left Atlanta, the oppressive conflict

imposed on me by the Atlanta session, having to defend myself against many people in our own presbytery who actively and personally tried to keep me from coming here as your pastor. Nothing about that was normal. To the contrary, it was all but devastating in its impact upon my life and my family.

So I enjoy a sense of "normal" whenever it happens, even if it is what we often today label as "new normal." I also understand that I am not guaranteed that enjoyment of "normal." I understand that we live in a fallen world, which means that suffering exists, even unto death. I understand that the struggles of life are inescapable, and that sin will continue sometimes in abundance. Not just my own sin, in the struggles of my own soul, but the sins of others that affect me. Further, the foolishness of others sometimes harms me.

I understand that we live in a world filled with hypocrisy, hypocrisy displayed daily in the affairs of our national government. Since I am a resident of Virginia, that foolishness and hypocrisy is evident in my own state government as well. Things are not the way they ought to be, and I can't change that. In many ways, I deeply lament it. And I am often frustrated by it. At times, we all suffer greatly because of it. Yet somehow, we need to come to terms with all of that, at least in order to learn how to live in such a world.

I want to tie all of that back to the encouragements of Isaiah 40, which begins with that great and marvelous invitation of the gospel we studied last week.

Is. 40:1 "Comfort, yes, comfort My people!" Says your God.  
2 "Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her, That her warfare is ended, That her iniquity is pardoned; For she has received from the Lord's hand Double for all her sins."

Isaiah 40 then immediately begins to describe the contrast between the lowly and insignificant position of mankind in the context of the greatness of the glory of God's eternal wisdom and power. And we will continue that theme this afternoon, in a series of three questions that the Lord asks, and answers, through the prophet. These are real questions, and by that I mean questions that you and I might be asked ourselves. And I don't want to consider these questions with any sense of condemnation toward those who would face these questions. That's not the point. Nor is the point to leave us feeling discouraged or depressed because of how awful things might be. Quite to the contrary. This chapter is one of great encouragement. It is encouragement that comes in the context of our humility as human beings, as we consider the great glory of God. But the encouragement is in the response of God to those very struggles that can so often weigh us down.

The prophet has already established the idea of our humility as creatures, as we saw last week. For example, v.6 "All flesh is grass, And all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, Because the breath of the Lord blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever."

And,

v.15 "Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, And are counted as the small dust on the scales; Look, He lifts up the isles as a very little thing. 16 And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, Nor its beasts sufficient for a burnt offering. 17 All nations before Him are as nothing, And they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless."

Yet that doesn't leave us without hope. Instead, it leaves us totally and entirely dependent upon God. And so the first question of our text this afternoon is,

## **I. A QUESTION OF GOD'S ETERNAL POWER.**

It is a question asked by God of those who have seemed to forgotten that sense of God's power. Or at least, lost their proper perspective of it. And again, let me add, that is understandable, in the light of the disfunction of this world. When you look at the selfish, foolish and immature behavior of so many of our national leaders, do you really believe that God has established every civil authority that power? When you see the wickedness of mankind displayed by mass shooters among others, can you really comprehend that God is as we say he is? When people harm you, when they act wickedly or out of malice, it is understandable to wonder, where is the reality of God's power at work?

So the question from God comes to us in the words of, v.21

The question is,

### **A. An appropriately humbling challenge.**

And that's where we have to start. We have to get beyond the sense of our own importance. So verse 21 is a series of rhetorical questions that accomplish that very thing. It's a gentle and mild rebuke, putting us in our place by emphasizing God's place. God's exalted place. "Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?"

Well, you should have. That's the rebuke. It should be obvious, because it is clearly evident. There is no mistake. No question or debate. Ever since the foundation of the world, God's eternal power is unmistakably known and clearly revealed.

Paul says the same thing, doesn't he?

Rom. 1:19 "...because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen,

being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.”

The answer to those rhetorical questions is plain. It is a description of,

### **B. God and man.**

The contrast between God and man.

v.22-24

As I stressed last week, that contrast is crucial for your spiritual well-being. The awareness that God sits above the circle of the earth. And we inhabitants are as grasshoppers! God stretches out the heavens like you or I would stretch out a curtain. And when God blows on us, we wither. That’s the contrast that is so important to embrace. That’s what keeps us in our proper place, with the appropriate perspective on life.

And that leads to the second question, again a challenge to those who think they can create a god out of their own imagination. So the challenging question is,

## **II. A QUESTION REGARDING GOD’S UNIQUE GLORY.**

v.25

We creatures are prone to make a likeness of God. We are prone to want to see something, to touch something, that we can honor and recognize as God. We’re visual, and we live in this created world, so we tend to exchange the true and living God for something in creation. Something real, in terms of this earthly, physical world.

Again, back to Romans 1, describing the sinfulness of mankind, we read,

Rom. 1:22 “Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.”

That’s our inclination. We exchange the glory of God for a creature, we try to make God in our image. And this question in verse 25 is a rebuke to that whole idea. And this rhetorical question has the effect of being,

### **A. A declaration of God’s absolute superiority.**

“To whom then will you liken Me?” Who is there that even corresponds to me? That is the question. That is the rebuke. “‘To whom shall I be equal?’ says the Holy One.” And of course, the answer comes shouting back at us, no one. There is no one equal with God. There is no one who compares to God. Instead, there is this ever present and absolute distinction between God the creator over here, and man the created being over here.

Our catechism teaches us not only that God is wise, powerful, holy, just, good and truthful. But that God is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in each of those things. To some extent, we can be wise. But God’s wisdom is infinite. It is eternal. He is omniscient. We can have some measure of power, but God’s power is infinite. He is omnipotent.

God is totally and absolutely superior to us, as a creator is to a creature. Isn’t that Paul’s point in,

Rom. 9:20 “But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” 21 Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?”

Now, what is the benefit of this sort of perspective? Why am I presenting this as such a good and positive thing in terms of our understanding of God? On the surface, it might not seem good at all. To some, this perspective of God and man is actually harmful. Despairing. So what is the benefit?

Certainly, I would make reference to God's grace, as I did this morning. And the idea here is that it is God's absolute superiority over us that shines such a bright light upon his grace to us. He doesn't have to be gracious to us, in a hypothetical and impersonal sense. He is superior to us, but nonetheless he is engaged with us. By way of condescension, to be sure. He stoops down to us, that we might relate to him. And here is the point—that the benefit of his grace comes to us when we are most conscious of our own lowliness. When we are the most humble, when we are the most conscious of our own creaturely abasement, then we are most ready and able to avail ourselves of the infinite power of our great God.

Is. 57:15 “For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

So it's not just a low self-esteem, as psychologists might label it. Rather, it's a right sense of position. We know who God is, and who don't liken him to anything in creation. And then are we ready and able to,

### **B. Contemplate the personal power of the works of God.** v.26

That's a healthy worldview. That's a healthy religion. That's the foundation of a healthy relationship with God. “Lift up your

eyes on high, And see who has created these things.” The stars in the sky.

“Lift up your eyes on high, And see who has created these things, Who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name.” That's where you start in your knowledge of God. Look at every star in the sky, and realize that God brought out every one. Recognize and proclaim this as the starting point of our faith, that God calls every star by name. He knows every one.

But there is more than that. It's not just a sentimental sort of knowledge, nor a merely affectionate awareness, sort of like a little girl with a baby kitten. No, there is much more. God not only calls every star by name, he puts every one in its proper place. “By the greatness of His might And the strength of His power; Not one is missing.”

So our faith requires us to contemplate the personal power of the works of God. And that becomes a foundation of our praise. For example,

Ps. 147:1 “Praise the Lord! For it is good to sing praises to our God; For it is pleasant, and praise is beautiful. 2 The Lord builds up Jerusalem; He gathers together the outcasts of Israel. 3 He heals the brokenhearted And binds up their wounds. 4 He counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by name. 5 Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite. 6 The Lord lifts up the humble; He casts the wicked down to the ground. 7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; Sing praises on the harp to our God, 8 Who covers the heavens with clouds, Who prepares rain for the earth, Who makes grass to grow on the mountains. 9 He gives to the beast its food, And to the young ravens that cry. 10 He does not delight in the strength of the horse; He takes no pleasure in the legs of a man. 11 The Lord takes pleasure in those who fear Him, In those who hope in His

mercy. 12 Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!”

There, as it is with Isaiah 40, the unique glory and infinite power of God form the foundation of our ability to trust in his mercy. “He heals the brokenhearted And binds up their wounds,” we read in verse 3 of that Psalm. And in the very next verse, “He counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by name.”

That’s the context for the third and final question in our text this afternoon. It is a very real question, but one which God can answer. It is actually a very real sense of struggle. It is,

### **III. A QUESTIONS REGARDING THE STRUGGLES OF OUR LIVES.**

Here is where it gets the most practical, and encouraging. Here is the focal point, the climax, of this whole chapter. It begins with a question that many people ask, or at least feel. And the prophet actually asks the question of them,

v.27

That’s the question, and the question does have,

#### **A. A sense of complaint.**

Maybe you don’t think you should ever ask that question, so you don’t. But you might still feel the pain of the question in your heart. Maybe you ask that question over and over, and are frustrated by the seemingly inability to obtain an answer.

So the Lord probes our hearts with such simple words. Why do you say, “My way is hidden from the Lord?” Is it really, is it really hidden from the Lord, who puts every star in order in the sky?

Why do you say, “My just claim is passed over by my God”? The sense of complaint just got a bit deeper, didn’t it? My just claim is passed over. There is no justice, at least not for me. That’s the sense of complaint. That’s the anguish you all might feel at times when you live in this fallen world.

Where is God in all of this? Where is his justice in my experiences? And here is the answer, based on all that has gone before in this chapter about the exalted glory of God and the relative insignificance of us. Here is the answer, that we, grasshoppers, shall still find the help and the hope that only an infinite God can provide. We may be grasshoppers, a drop in the bucket compared to the whole of the world. We may be as the grass that withers and the flowers that fade. But God is entirely different. And that’s where the answer to the probing question of verse 27 is found in the encouragement of verses 28-31. Here is where the personal and practical blessing of God’s power come into focus.

#### **B. The personal and practical blessing of God’s power.**

No, the world is not normal. Yes, there is a lot of sin, a lot of rebellion and a lot of foolishness. Yes, death remains the last enemy to be destroyed, and there is no destruction yet. Death is doomed, to be sure, but it still stings. It still hurts. There is affliction. There is trouble. There is persecution, for some even unto death.

Man is still mortal and corruptible. The heart of man is still desperately wicked. The evil one is still a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. And it may seem, from your perspective, that God doesn’t see. That your way is hidden. It may seem that injustice reigns, and that everyone seems to do what is right in their own eyes. And all of that may seem, to you, rather desperate. Exasperating. Even hopeless.

But no, the infinite nature of God's power is of great encouragement. Indeed, the only possible encouragement that would be of any benefit at all. So we read,  
v.29

It's an apparent contradiction, much like the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. Yes, we are weak. Indeed, mortal and corruptible. Physically weak. That's an inescapable conclusion, to be sure. But God gives power, TO THE WEAK. That's the point. He gives strength, to those who have no strength. That's how God works. In our weakness, in our earthly physical weakness, in the humility of that weakness, he gives us the strength that only he possesses.

It's not necessarily physical strength. But in best sense, spiritual strength. Strength of heart. Strength of soul. That blessing comes when we are made to be weak.

Doesn't Paul say the same thing, about his own experience of weakness?

2 Cor. 12:7 "And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. 8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. 9 And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Is your way hidden from God? No, not at all. Has God overlooked your just cause? No. Not in the big picture. For he

gives this encouragement so personally, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." And when you are able to recognize that work of God in your own life, then you are able to say, "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Too often, as creatures, we rely upon our own strength. Our human strength. Or our human wisdom. Our own plans. And Isaiah's encouragement continues with words that remind us that our human strength, even at its best, even at its peak, is entirely insufficient.

v.30

OK. Everyone has to agree with that. Even the strongest among us will grow weary. And the answer is to be found only in the exercise of our faith in this great God who Isaiah has been proclaiming throughout this chapter.

So what is the solution when it appears that your way is hidden from the Lord? Or when your just cause seems to be thwarted?

v.31

That's not an instant cure for the troubles of this world. That's not a panacea for all that ails us as human beings. And those aren't superficial and simplistic words that might actually cause more harm than good when the downplay or dismiss the actual human experience of suffering.

But in the midst of that human condition, in the midst of the loss of what you might think should be normal, in the midst of sin and foolishness, even wickedness all around us, in the midst of your own weakness and corruption, these words should sing out loudly and clearly.

v.31

The physical weakness associated with this earthly world is replaced by the spirit strength that only God can provide.

Beloved, this is deep and mature faith.

Is. 30:15 “For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: “In returning and rest you shall be saved; In quietness and confidence shall be your strength.”

That’s what it means to wait on the Lord. Quietness and confidence. Or,

Ps. 46:10 “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth! 11 The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge.”

Similarly,

Hab. 2:20 “But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him.”

As Jesus put it so well, in this world you will have tribulation. Everyone. Or in the testimony of the Apostle Paul,

2 Cor. 4:7 “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. 8 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. 12 So then death is working in us, but life in you.”

v.30 “Even the youths shall faint and be weary, And the young men shall utterly fall.”

Yes they will. But here is the answer. Here is the hope. Here is the promise.

v.31 “But those who wait on the Lord Shall renew their strength; [It is the strength that only an eternal God can give.] They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.”