

This new section of Isaiah began with Isaiah addressing the future exiles in Babylon. The time of their captivity would come to an end and they would be restored to the Promised Land. The Temple would be rebuilt and the worship of the nation would be purified.

The problem with the nation had been idolatry. Joshua had challenged them when they first came into the Promised Land to choose who they would serve. After all God had done for them, they still had idols carried with them from Egypt (Joshua 24:14). They could worship those or the gods of the Ammorites. Joshua declared that he and his house would worship YHWH, the eternal God of Israel, the great I Am (Joshua 24:15).

As time passed their real choice became clear. They adopted the various gods of the people they had expelled from the land. There were occasional revivals such as the one under Hezekiah, but the nation would soon revert to idolatry. Moses warned them in his farewell address that they would choose idolatry and go into captivity because of it (Deuteronomy 31:29; 28:41). Eight-hundred-years later it came to pass. Isaiah is writing to the future captives, but the first readers were still one-hundred-years away from the prophecies of Moses and Isaiah coming to pass.

Isaiah was telling the people something similar to the message of Moses. They will cling to their idolatry and suffer because of it. But like Moses, Isaiah has already spoken of their future change of heart and the promise of being restored to the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 30:1-3). Our passage today is addressing the banality of idol worship. It is similar to Moses' exhortation. He reminded the people that the gods of the nations through which they passed were powerless against YHWH, so why would they ever worship these gods? In one passage he refers to these gods as demons (Deuteronomy 32:17).

God has Isaiah take a different angle. He begins with the greatness of the Creator and compares it to the irrelevance of an idol. <sup>12</sup> *Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?* Isaiah 40:12  
Isaiah may have had access to the account of Job. In it, God asked Job a similar question. <sup>4</sup> *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. <sup>5</sup> Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?"* Job 38:4-5

Job wanted to confront God with what he perceived to be the injustice of his situation. The Jews under King Manasseh thought that if they didn't get the answer they wanted

from YHWH, then they'd try other gods. Man has a tendency to seek instant gratification at any cost.

It is mankind's dilemma. We are the crown of creation and yet we are broken. We were created to be the lords of the earth (Genesis 1:28), but our fallen condition has perverted our desires. We were to have our way in the earth in conjunction with our fellowship with God. That loving relationship was to guide our desires, but the fall of man destroyed that communion. We still want to reign but for the wrong reasons (Jeremiah 17:9). Our desires are rarely in-line with God's. That is why we turn to other gods to justify our choices of self-gratification.

Even a narcissist looks outside himself or herself to find satisfaction and approval. **When we look to something other than God, we become idolaters like Israel.** We create a god we can direct rather than yield to a God who directs us. Because our communion with God is so broken, we can't even recognize what is good for us. God allows circumstances to come into our lives to turn us back to trust and depend on Him alone. Our response is often to run away to find another solution that will change our situation. With King Hezekiah it was to trust in the idol of wealth (2Kings 18:15-16). With his son Manasseh, it was to look to other gods (2Kings 21:11). The only real difference is that Hezekiah repented and humbled himself. This is the message to Job and to the nation of Judah: humble yourself and recognize the greatness of your Creator. He is the One who has allowed you to be in your situation for His purposes.

If you think you are so smart as to know what is best for you, what the future holds, and how to deal with your circumstances, then just answer these basic questions. What do you know about the creation of the very earth you stand on?

Astronomers discovered comets that were going the wrong way. It completely messed with their idea of how the solar system formed. If their theory was right, the comets should all go in the same direction. The first one discovered that was going against traffic was considered to be mistaken data. When the second one was confirmed they had to acknowledge it.

The earth is so perfectly engineered for human life that, as one astronomer put it, it would be like shooting at quarter a hundred million light years away and hitting it dead center. There is not just balance in earth and water, there is the perfect distance from the sun with just the right speed of rotation to avoid temperature extremes. The magnetic poles shield us from solar radiation. The giant planets of Jupiter and Saturn reduce the possibility of comets colliding into earth. Our sun is just the right size and type and the earth in a narrow band of circular orbit that enables water to exist. We are in the right area of the galaxy. Too far in and we would have too much radiation. Too far into the spiral arm and we couldn't see other galaxies. The moon is just the right size and distance to stir the oceans to even out water temperatures but not too much to cause massive tidal fluctuation. How great is the God that put that all together with a

numerous other physics and chemical constants that had to each be within an extremely narrow range?

God asks us, "Who has measured space?" We have no idea how big the universe is. We can see quite far but still don't know if there is an end or if there is more beyond the farthest lights the Hubble can capture.

*<sup>13</sup> Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel?*

*<sup>14</sup> 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?* Isaiah 40:13-14 Is it even imaginable to measure the Spirit of the LORD? Would any creature dare counsel their Creator? Job was foolishly asking to do just that (Job 31:35). That is what we do as well when we look to created things for answers or fulfillment instead of looking to God. We are expressing our conviction that we have a better idea. How foolish! The God who knows the shape and weight of every grain of sand, of every cell in your body, of the details of eternity, what we would call past and future, doesn't need our input. We can't inform Him of anything. And yet we argue with Him instead of accepting what comes from His hand.

Recently a mental image has helped me to have a change of attitude about what comes into my life each day. I see myself in God's grip (Psalm 139:10). Those fingers that hold me are in a certain position, and that hand takes me where He knows best. If I allow myself to conform to the way He is holding me, I'm at peace. I can fight in vain to change His grip and direction, which represent my present circumstances, but I just make myself uncomfortable, even miserable, in the process. It shows I'm not trusting that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purposes (Romans 8:28). Resisting shows I think I know better than the God who created all and knows everything.

It's about trust and having faith that God means what He says. Can we believe Him? Can we trust Him? Then why do we keep squirming in His hand? I have started noticing when I squirm: traffic, human responses, unexpected interruptions, whenever things don't go like I think they should. That tells me I'm pretty big headed and need to relax, let go, and trust God in these areas of life. He does have the whole world in His hands. When we realize the greatness of God, how can we turn to idolatry of self-will?

*<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. <sup>17</sup> All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.*

Isaiah 40:15-17 When Satan tempted Jesus with the kingdoms of the world (Matthew 4:8-9), the temptation was not that of the power obtained by ruling. Those national powers are nothing to the LORD. The resources of those nations are things He spoke into existence. It was the opportunity to exchange unjust rule with righteous rule that

would meet the physical and emotional needs of man. It was a chance to eliminate most of the world's suffering. But there cannot be a good solution brought through an evil method. Meeting our needs will not heal our hearts. Worship is for God alone.

God doesn't need our offering. We are blessed to give it. He doesn't need our service, but He graciously gives us the privilege of serving Him. God doesn't need our fellowship, but He offers it to us because He is love (1John 4:8).

Considering the little we can comprehend of the greatness of God, what can we compare Him to? <sup>18</sup> *To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?* Isaiah 40:18 Though man is made in the image of God, we should not compare man to God (Psalm 40:5). We are creation; He is Creator. Everything we do is imperfect. Everything He does is perfect. There are no heavenly beings that compare with the LORD (Psalm 89:6). God is the eternal Spirit. Nothing compares! So when we turn to things, instead of the infinite God, we are being like the idolaters of Judah.

<sup>19</sup> *An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains.* <sup>20</sup> *He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move.* Isaiah 40:19-20 Whether it was made of precious metal or wood, it is just a piece of matter that is shaped by the hand of man. So are the solutions and answers of man, products of our limited ability. How can we compare that with an infinite God who inhabits eternity? We think how foolish the people of Judah were to look to some carved piece of wood, but in essence, we do the same by looking to man's solutions to our situations (Jeremiah 2:13).

<sup>21</sup> *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?* <sup>22</sup> *It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;* Isaiah 40:21-22 Remember that this was written around 700 BC. It declares several truths that are more recent discoveries. The earth is round. It had a beginning. The heavens are still being stretched out. In fact, astronomers have now concluded that the universe we can observe is expanding at an increasing rate of speed. That can't be accounted for by the Big Bang theory.

<sup>23</sup> *who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.* <sup>24</sup> *Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.* Isaiah 40:23-24 All our great leaders of history lived for a moment and then perished. The most powerful of men are like a blade of grass that springs up in the springtime and dries in the summer and blows away in the fall (James 4:14). They boast in their arrogance of the power that God has granted them, but before long it is left to others. They think their influence will last, but the next person in power quickly

undoes all the good or evil of those before them. I heard of an interview with college students recently, the majority of whom did not know who Ronald Reagan was.

Along these lines, Malcom Muggeridge wrote the following: I've heard a crazed, cracked Austrian (Hitler) announce to the world the establishment of a Reich that would last a thousand years. I have seen an Italian clown (Mussolini) say he was going to stop and restart the calendar with his own ascension to power. I've heard a murderous Georgian brigand in the Kremlin (Stalin), acclaimed by the intellectual elite of the world as being wiser than Solomon, more humane than Marcus Aurelius, more enlightened than Ashoka.

I have seen America wealthier and, in terms of military weaponry, more powerful than the rest of the world put together—so that had the American people so desired, they could have outdone a Caesar, or an Alexander in the range and scale of their conquests. All in one lifetime, all in one lifetime, all gone! Gone with the wind!

England, now part of a tiny island off the coast of Europe, threatened with dismemberment and even bankruptcy. Hitler and Mussolini dead, remembered only in infamy. Stalin a forbidden name in the regime he helped found and dominate for some three decades. America haunted by fears of running out of those precious fluids that keeps their motorways roaring, and the smog settling, with troubled memories of a disastrous campaign in Vietnam, and the victories of the Don Quixote's of the media as they charged the windmills of Watergate. All in one lifetime, all in one lifetime, all gone! Gone with the wind!

Behind the debris of these solemn supermen, and self-styled imperial diplomatists, there stands the gigantic figure of One: because of whom, by whom, in whom, and through whom alone, mankind may still have peace—the person of Jesus Christ. I present him as the way, the truth, and the life. Do you know Him?"

*<sup>25</sup> To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.*

*<sup>26</sup> Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing.* Isaiah 40:25-26 Who created the universe with its incredible beauty where no human eye sees (Genesis 1:16)? How many stars has God stretched out like a tent? There are 300 billion stars in our galaxy and 100 billion galaxies the Hubble has discovered, but only God knows how many more. He has named each and every one of those stars (Psalm 19:1).

What is God trying to tell us through his servant Isaiah? God is so great our finite minds cannot begin to fathom Him. We needed the incarnation to get just a tiny sense of the wonder of who He is. Why would we look to anything or anyone else for solutions to our situations? Why would we hope in anything else? Can we trust in His grip of grace on our lives? If you can't trust Him, there is no hope. You certainly can't trust man,

especially yourself. The end of idolatry begins when we start to see the greatness of Christ and His love and welcome that love into our hearts. I ask with Muggerridge, "Do you know Him?"

#### Questions

- 1 What was Judah's big problem?
- 2 What is man's dilemma?
- 3 How can we relate to idolatry today?
- 4 What are a few ways in which the earth is fine tuned for us?
- 5 What was the temptation in Satan's offer of the kingdoms of man?
- 6 Why is God incomparable?
- 7 What can we now add to Muggerridge's words?
- 8 What is the message to us?
- 9 Are you conforming to God's grip of grace?
- 10 Why would we turn to any other?