

2. Is Our God Big Enough?: Big enough to rule creation

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 21 May 2008

Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Now in the Bibles, if you would turn please, to page 599. Now this great passage, Isaiah 40, I said last week, the prophet in the 8th century before Christ is writing at a time of great crisis.

His nation is threatened by the great Assyrian Empire, but he's looking beyond that to a time that's still to come, when the Babylonians are going to take the people away into exile.

And in this chapter he's looking beyond that to the time when they'll return. And he's using this chapter to teach them and to teach us great truths about God.

How big is our God? That's what this chapter is about. Now today we're going to look particularly at verses 12 to 24. We're going to read from verse 1 to the end of verse 24.

Isaiah chapter 40, verse 1. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she is received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

[1 : 16] A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.

The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

A voice says, Cry. And I said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, Herald of good news, lift up your voice with strength. O Jerusalem, Herald of good news, lift it up, fear not.

[2 : 21] Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God, behold the Lord God, comes with might, and his arm rules for him. Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

He will tend his flock like a shepherd, and he will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

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?

Who has measured the spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him 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?

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.

[3 : 30] Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor is it beast enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before him.

They are accounted by him as less than nothing, and emptiness. To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?

An idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver's chains.

He who is too impoverished for an offering, chooses wood that will not rot.

He seeks out a skillful craftsman, the set of an idol that will not move. 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? 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, who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of earth as emptiness.

[4 : 41] 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.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord, one of the greatest passages in the whole of Scripture. I want you to imagine yourselves standing by the shores of the Mediterranean Sea on the coast of Israel. Some of you may have been there. Near the modern city of Tel Aviv. And you're looking out to the Mediterranean, what the Old Testament calls the great sea, that goes on forever and ever and ever. The Hebrews did not like the sea. Anyone who goes to sea in the Bible tends to end up wishing they hadn't. Think of Jonah. Think of Paul. It's impossible to imagine a Hebrew John Macefield. I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky. They feared the sea. They feared the sea as the haunt of Leviathan, of the powers of evil. And as a prophet looks out over the heaving waters of the Mediterranean, and thinks of his God, he thinks this great sea is a tiny little puddle in the hand of God.

[6 : 01] Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand? Verse 12. And he turns behind him and looks to where the coastal plain sweeps up to the plateau of Lebanon.

He imagines Lebanon's teeming forests cut down. He imagines all of the vast wildlife of Lebanon sacrificed on an altar, which is the plateau of Lebanon itself.

And he realizes that would be an offering far too small for this God who is so great. Lebanon, verse 16, would not suffice for fuel, nor is its beasts enough for a burnt offering.

Is our God big enough? And Isaiah says, This is the Lord of everything that was, of everything that is, and of everything that will be.

Now in a sense, verses 1 to 11 answer the question, Does he want to save us? Does he want to bring his people back from exile to return them to their land?

[7 : 05] And this chapter, these verses, 12 to 24, is now answering the question, Can he save us? We know he wants to save us. We know he's well disposed to us.

We know, verse 11, he will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. Is he big enough? Is he up to the job? And that's what Isaiah addresses here.

And he says two things. First of all, he says, God is greater than everything he has made. That's really verses 12 to 17. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand?

Closed the dust of the earth in a measure. We think of the hollow of our hand, a few inches. When we think of some kind of balances or measures, another few inches.

Isaiah is saying, our God, in relation to the universe, is like that. He is big. He is massive. He is overwhelmingly greater than everything he's made.

[8 : 10] You can get a tiny glimpse, if you like, of a God's eye view of the world when you're flying. But that's only partial, only temporary. As God looks down on the world he has made.

And the prophet takes the two basic components of our planet, the earth and the waters. And he means the whole of our planet by that. So in the Hebrews talked, heaven and earth means everything that there is.

As far as the east is from the west, means an infinite distance. Indeed, I've often thought an observer looking at our planet from somewhere in space, would be more inclined to call it sea, rather than earth, because of the vast amount of water that covers the surface.

So the entire universe lies before God, small and insignificant, because he is its sole creator. Now, when the people of God were in Babylon and listened to the stories about the gods of Babylon, one of the things they would have learned is that the Babylonian God, Marduk, the chief God, when he created the world, needed help.

He wasn't able to do it himself. See what Isaiah is saying? Our God did not get a committee together to create the universe. Imagine what kind of a universe it would have been and it had been created by a committee.

[9 : 34] In fact, it would never have been created. Well, they all argued together about what they ought to have done. Frederick of Prussia is once reputed to have said, had I been present on the day of creation, I would have given some very useful advice.

Now, the Lord God, the creator of heaven and earth, did not need any advice when he made heaven and earth. He is the sole creator. And therefore, the Bible tells us that when he made heaven and earth, it was good.

It was very good. It fulfilled the purpose for which it was made. But look at verse 14. Whom did he consult? Who made him understand?

Who taught him the path of justice and taught him knowledge and showed the way of understanding? The universe is not a mindless collection of atoms. The universe has a plan. The universe has a purpose. I was reading a very interesting article the other week by the astronomer Royal, who was talking about how we know so much more about the universe than, say, the ancient Greek philosophers did.

[10:41] We know a great deal about how the universe works. What he said was this, though. We still do not know what happened in that microsecond before the universe itself came into being.

Now, that's a very sensible thing for the astronomer Royal to say. But the truth of the matter is we do know what happened. What happened was that God spoke into the darkness and chaos and said, let there be light.

And that's why scientific attacks on creation are so short-sighted. because they can only start once creation is already going. They can explain a lot about the process.

They can explain a lot about the mechanics, about the Big Bang. And since the astronomer Royal used the phrase Big Bang in his article, I think lesser mortals like me can also use it.

We can explain a lot about the how. What we cannot explain is the why. The moment, as C.S. Lewis says, when the creating words spoke into the darkness and said, let there be light.

[11:48] So he's the sole creator. And because of that, he is greater than humans. Look at verse 50 now. Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket.

Now think of the nations, which means humanity and its collective and organized strength. Think about human military power. Think about human commercial power.

About scientific power. About intellectual power. Or the sheer, vast, thronging numbers on our planet. The nations are like a drop in a bucket, he says.

You see how everything is being brought down to size. A drop in a bucket. And are accounted as the dust on the scales.

Behold, he takes up the coastlands or the islands. Favorite word of Isaiah, meaning the lands westward around the Mediterranean. which were not fully known in Isaiah's time of course, but where civilizations were already beginning to grow up which were going profoundly to affect the history of the world.

[12:55] This God knows them all and to him they are like a drop in a bucket. All the nations, verse 17, are as nothing before him. Now that doesn't mean that God doesn't care for the nations.

It doesn't mean that he despises the nations. It means in comparison with his sheer greatness and vastness. That not even the whole of organized humanity in all its impressiveness, in all its magnificence, in all its undoubted achievements, they're like the small dust on a balance.

And it cuts down to size, doesn't it, any alternative way of trusting. If our God is like that, then there's absolutely nothing and no one who can stand against him.

So he's greater than all that he has made. But then Isaiah goes on in verses 18 to 24 to talk about, to say that he is the only authority, the only one who deserves to be worshipped.

Isaiah attacks idolatry. And it's not so much the wickedness of idolatry as the silliness of idolatry that he attacks. If God is like that, then verse 18, to whom then will you compare God?

[14:14] What likeness? What kind of model are you going to make? What kind of painting are you going to draw? What kind of object are you going to create that can begin to encapsulate in any sense of the word the greatness of this God?

An idol or as for an idol, you can sense the contempt in his voice. Idolatry is silly. If you're well off, you go to the posh furniture shop, you can buy something that's going to look impressive in your sitting room.

A craftsman casts it. You may even get it made to measure for yourself. You may even send to the idol. You may order it online nowadays and get something sent that will look great, that will look impressive, that will look magnificent.

If you're too impoverished, you'll have to go to Ikea, R, B, and Q and set up your own idol and if it's like the normal furniture that comes from those places, the instructions will be impossible to follow and the screws won't fit.

That is idolatry. Worshipping something less than ourselves, a designer-made idol. Why worship something that's not only less than God in heaven, but less than you and I?

[15:28] Now, of course, there are attractions and idolatry. If I set up a God that can't see, that's great when I'm up to no good, isn't it? If I set up a God that can't hear, when I'm gossiping and telling lies and saying things I should not be saying, that's a very convenient God.

Not much good, although if I want advice, is it if I want help, if I want God to guide me. Do I go to a blind idol who cannot see and say, look, I'm in a mess. I want you to help me.

I want you to guide me. I cannot see the way to go. See, that's why Isaiah says in chapter 6, the whole earth is full of his glory, his glory that shows up all the sham, his glory that shows us the way to go.

Idolatry, says Isaiah, is silly. Now, I doubt if any of us have set up in our sitting room an idol of Marduk or Baal or Nebo or anything like that.

We do have plenty of idols, don't we? things we trust in which aren't God. Maybe our bank balance, there may be one or two of you who trust in that. I don't, but there may be one or two of you who do.

[16:36] It may be your brains, maybe your job, maybe your relationships. All of these kind of things we're tempted to trust in. All of these things are not wrong in themselves if they're received as gifts from God.

When we make them into God, they become deceptive. They fade away. They disappear. They mock at us. And what is the reality that Isaiah is teaching here?

It's what the psalmist says, My help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. Not my help is in the name of Marduk whom I made and carried in procession.

Not my help is in the name of Baal whom I dance around and try to get him to listen to me. My help is in the name of the Lord because he made heaven and earth.

And you'll notice as well, verse 21, Do you not know? Do you not hear? Have you not understood?

This isn't just something to keep to ourselves. Think about idol worship.

[17:38] It's going to be very private business. I can set up the idol in my sitting room or nowadays on my computer and worship before it. I can trust in it.

But this God, this God is the God who made heaven and earth. His truth is public truth. It's truth to be known. It's truth to be declared. It's truth to be understood.

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth. Now don't try to be pedantically literalistic about these.

These are gigantic metaphors and similes and images telling us about the sheer greatness of God sitting above the circle of the earth, looking down at all this impressive display of human power.

What are they like? Grasshoppers. It stretches out the heavens like a curtain, spreads them like a tent to dwell in. Long before this, King Solomon had said, the heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain God, how much less this house that I have built.

Even the heavens in all their vastness, and we know of course from modern astronomy something about just how vast the heavens are. Even they are not a fitting house, if you like, for this God in his greatness.

[18:56] Scarcely are they planted, verse 20, scarcely so, and scarcely is their stem taken root in the earth, and he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them away. In other words, any attempt to build our lives on anything other than this God will end in emptiness.

This word emptiness is the word that Ecclesiastes uses. Without God everything is empty, it's futile. And this word is often used for idols, they're a puff of wind.

But life built on this God is stable. This God is a rock. This God is the creator. And because he's the creator, he's going to finish the task that he's begun.

And it's not surprising, and in the final section we'll see this next week, that Isaiah repeats his question, to whom then will you compare God? Will we compare him to our achievements?

Will we compare him to our ambitions? Will we compare him to everything that is impressive over all that Isaiah is going to write? Not good enough, because there is only one God who is big enough, strong enough, and mighty enough to carry the whole world, and not just to carry the whole world, but to carry you and I in his arms, to save us, to make us into new people.

[20:16] And that's the God that Isaiah is commending to us today, the God who deserves our trust. Amen. Let's pray. To whom then can we liken God?

God our Father, we confess we trust in many things other than you. We trust in money, we trust in relationships, we trust in our brains, we trust in our achievements.

These are gifts from you for which we are grateful, but help us to trust only in you, and to say with the psalmist, my help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Amen.