

Isaiah 40:12-26 - Be comforted

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Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0 : 00] Keep hold of Isaiah chapter 40 and we're going to be reading from verse 12 down to verse 26. Vanessa is going to come and read for us. Isaiah chapter 40 verses 12 through to 26.

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand? Or with the breadth of his hand has marked off the heavens? Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket?

Or weighed the mountains on the scales of the hills in a balance? Who can fathom the spirit of the Lord or instruct the Lord as his counsellor?

Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him? And who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?

Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket. They are regarded as dust on the scales. He weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.

[1 : 07] Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. Before him, all the nations are as nothing.

They are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. With whom then will you compare gold? To what image will you liken him?

As for an idol, a metal worker casts it and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. A person too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot.

They look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple. Do you not know? Have you not heard?

Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth and its people are like grasshoppers.

[2 : 16] He stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

No sooner are they planted. No sooner are they sown. No sooner do they take root in the ground than he blows on them and they wither.

And a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens.

Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

Great, thank you, Vanessa. Let's pray and ask for the Lord's help as we look at those verses together. Let's pray. Gracious God, we thank you so much that you're a speaking God and that this is your word to us this morning.

[3 : 31] I'm so certain that I have nothing to say on my own. But Lord, I pray that you might use me for the sake of your glory this morning.

May each of us have tender hearts towards you and eagerness to listen to what you might be saying to us, we pray. And we ask, Lord, that the comfort of Isaiah 40 might belong to us and be ours through your word this morning.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, we're jumping into the middle of Isaiah 40. And if you've not been with us before, if you're visiting, it's really good to have you.

Last week, we looked at the beginning of Isaiah chapter 40. And next week, we're going to look at the end of Isaiah 40 as we kind of look at Isaiah's prophecies about the coming of the Savior. Isaiah 40.

[4 : 54] What's going on in the passage is this. It's saying to us this. There is not a problem that you have. Right? There's not a difficult situation that you face.

There is not a worry on your mind or your heart, which is not comforted by a bigger view of God and who he is. Right? I'm not saying, the passage is not saying that if you have a big view of God, you

will never have another problem.

Right? It's not saying that. It's not saying that's not true. Right? It isn't, you know, get a big view of God and problems vanish. There are prosperity churches around our city. They're full of people. And they teach that. And it's false and it's dangerous. This is the point. Right? The point is that all of our worries, all of our struggles in life, all of our sufferings are not necessarily caused by a small view of God, but they are aggravated by a small view of God.

It's a small view of God and who he is. That's a myth, which denies us, the comfort that God intends us to have in the midst of our suffering and difficulty.

[6 : 04] Do you understand me? now i want us to think about how this works in our lives but before we get there just think about some of the examples in the bible about how this works out now don't worry if you've never met any of these characters from the bible before but let me just introduce you to a few people who in god's word discover that the bigness of god the greatness of god provides the comfort of god okay the comfort that isaiah 40 is talking about joe if you've heard of him is the great sufferer of the bible job's book is all about innocent suffering faced by a man who really doesn't deserve the horrors that happen to him what what at the end of the book though is god's pastoral wisdom for job you know job the great sufferer meets god and hears from him at the end of the book what does god say to him who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge have you ever given orders to the morning job have you ever shown the dawn its place job of course the answer is no i haven't here's god's pastoral wisdom to job the sufferer i am bigger and more majestic and more glorious than you imagined joshua is the guy who leads the conquest of the promised land and he's on the cusp of the battle for jericho it's the very first battle it's the very first time he's facing up to the enemies he's leading god's people on his own moses has died and he sees a man walking towards him with a drawn sword and joshua asks this man are you for us or are you against us and then this character who is clearly intimidating to joshua replies he goes neither i am the commander of the armies of the lord he says and i have come joshua falls on his face you know his god's pastoral wisdom to joshua on the face of this great battle he's like listen i am mighty and majestic it's not me coming down to be on your side you are getting to be on my team later on in the old testament elisha's servant is panicking in the city of dothan because he finds that it's surrounded by enemy armies and he is terrified and elisha says to the lord says please lord will you open the eyes of my servant so he can see what's really going on here and he sees that on the hill surrounding dothan behind the army are chariots and horses of fire the lord's armies are surrounding them here's god's antidote to fear and panic listen i'm bigger and more glorious than you thought let's try and be a bit more topical the christmas story zechariah the priest he hears about the birth of john the baptist the one who's going to prepare the way for jesus and he doubts the word that he's heard right so he hears that he's going to have this child and he doubts that that's actually going to happen because he realizes he's really old and his wife is really old and so the reply that comes from the angel is this i am gabriel and i stand in the presence of the lord it's like listen zechariah i know you're worried about this but have you any idea who i am and where i'm from you've just got a small view of god the suffering church in the book of revelation who receive the message of john in revelation they're told at the very beginning of the book that the one who is speaking to them is whom i am the alpha and the omega the beginning and the end who was and who is and is to come almighty he says you're suffering church what hope have you got what comfort are you going to find well here it is i am the first the last the one who is and was and is to come the almighty because as isaiah 40 will tell us this morning there is not a problem that you have there is not a

situation that you face there is not a worry which you have which is not comforted by a bigger clearer view of the majesty and the glory of god small views of god aggravate suffering and this morning that's true for you i know that in a gathering like this there are a lot of struggles and troubles maybe you're facing personal struggles family struggles work struggles grief loss sadness anxiety about the future you know one of the reasons that we're looking at this chapter in the build up to christmas is because i think christmas time brings some of those things which we spend the rest of the year pushing to one side it brings them to the fore doesn't it the missing person at the christmas table the work struggle and anxiety as you face the bill for a big christmas the sadness the loss the anxiety about family struggles you know we live don't we as well in a country which is in turmoil a world that's in turmoil and isaiah 40 tells you that in the midst of all that comfort comes from a bigger view of god comfort comes from a bigger view of god now listen in a way that's all i've

got to tell you this morning right that's all i've got to teach you comfort comes from a bigger view of god right and if you've come this morning just wanting to learn a few facts right that's it you can tick it off that was it that's the only thing i've got to tell you but we don't come to the bible do we just to learn facts we actually come with a deeper purpose than that we actually come to god's words not only to learn stuff in our heads but actually to experience the god of comfort don't we and so what i want us to do is to look at these verses and tease this out and essentially to be pasted by god in him giving us this bigger view of himself and to see how that works out in the situations that we face and there are three things i want to show to you from these verses the first one is this you can be comforted because god fathoms the world you can't fathom him verses 12 to 14.

isaiah's style as you look down at the passage is to ask obvious questions that lead us to a conclusion that he's driving at so god is the answer to all the questions in verse 12 who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand or with the breath of his hands marked off the heavens not you not me god is the answer and no one is the answer to the questions in verses 13 to 14 who can fathom the spirit of the lord no one who can instruct the lord as his counselor no one whom did the lord consult to enlighten him no one okay so verse 12 god alone is the one for whom the waters and the oceans are just a drop in the hollow of his hand yeah god alone now that the point here is not so much the physical scale of god it's not that isaiah is trying to get you to think of god as like a huge man right who's got such big hands that trillions of gallons of the pacific ocean are just like a drop in his palm it's not a literal image is it no this is a picture language god is spirit right he's inescapably present everywhere in his omnipresence he doesn't have hands in that sense to hold the water these words are meant to communicate something more than physical size to you the point really is that god holds or grasps or understands or directs the world the the contrast is that that god does that for the world the world does not do that for him it cannot in other words god is not part of creation to be studied he doesn't dwell in the creation he is over creation controlling the elements of the universe creation does not teach god verse 14 god has nothing to learn from the world because god knows it already in fact it only exists because he knows it it's slightly lost in our niv translations but the word fathom in verse 13 is the same as the word marked off in verse 12 so what you've got is this comparison between god as the one who fathoms the heavens and all that he's made while we as creatures we cannot fathom him he's beyond us now again just to be clear isaiah's point is not that god has a bigger brain than you of course i suppose in one sense that's true but but we shouldn't really think about god like that rather is that that our knowledge of god is on a on a totally different level or plane to him god isn't learning about the world we are learning about him we have nothing to teach him we have everything to learn from him let me try and illustrate what isaiah is saying here i don't know whether you know this guy at nicolaus otto come on elise the clicker is really glitchy so it's not actually elise's fault nicolaus otto does anyone know who he is anyone know what he invented well imagine for a moment that you meet nicolaus otto right and you introduce him to your car you see nicolaus otto is the guy who invented the four stroke engine okay and you you introduce him to your car say hey nicolaus i've got something to show you right come and have a look at this and you flip the bonnet of your car and as long as it's not an electric one you point out to him you know this is this is how it works okay these are the these are the four strokes you get compression and then you get spark you get ignition and then you get exhaust and you know i want to i want to work this through with you can you can you see how this works what would nicolaus say to you he said what are you doing don't patronize me the very idea of that engine started in here before it was ever there you can't teach me about your engine i thought of it and then it came into existence you can't teach me you'd be a fool now that that's the point here you can't teach god anything about the world the world existed in the mind of god and then came into existence you can't teach him it because it only exists because he knows it he thought of it

he thought of you thought of me we can't measure it out for him we can't fathom it and isaiah says to you that that should be a comfort to you how should that be a comfort to you well here it is it's because his assumption is that the anxiety of god's people is because they overestimate their own understanding and they underestimate god's listen this is what it is this is what makes you anxious is you overestimate your ability to understand and you underestimate god's ability to understand we assume that we should know stuff when we don't and we assume god doesn't know stuff when he does you know how this works don't you those endless hours of analysis those sleepless nights tossing and turning trying to work out what's happening and why you know if only i've done a and b instead of x and y then would i really be in this place now would would this have happened but

isaiah 40 says to you listen if you're looking for the comfort of the lord that's a pointless exercise the comfort of the lord comes from knowing that god knows and we don't there is a god who rules and reigns who fathoms the world and you cannot fathom him i don't know whether you know bill bryson you know bill bryson he wrote a book called the short history of nearly everything which i read a few years ago and he he's not a christian by any means in fact he would call himself the opposite of a christian um he uh he doesn't believe in god at all which is remarkable when you read his book his book ends like this he says the upshot of all of this is that we live in a universe whose age we can't quite compute surrounded by stars whose distances we don't altogether know filled with matter we can't identify operating in conformance with physical laws whose properties we don't truly understand says bill bryson in other words says isaiah you can't fathom god but he fathoms you and you should be comforted by that secondly we move from science to religion be comforted because god owns the world and you can't buy him off this is 15 to 17 as you look at it verse 15 seems at first quite similar to verse 12 surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket they're regarded as dust in the scales but it's not quite a repetition of the measuring the waters in the hollow of the hand here the point is not so much god's overseeing power but his ownership so as we were talking with the children it's not just that god understands or fathoms the universe but that god owns the stuff of the world and carries it around in that sense with even the very great things in our world the impressiveness of the nations being just like dust to him which means that you can't buy god off that point is driven home isn't it in verse 16 that even all the burnt wood of lebanon and sacrificed all its animals on the fire you still wouldn't own god god would not owe you a single thing if you gave him all that the world has because all the wood and all the animals were already his carried around by him as just a little bit of dust on a scales or a drop in a bucket which means verse 17 that they are nothing in comparison to him they are nothing and empty this is this is so brilliant and so important let me try and impress it on you if i can isaiah here is knocking on the head all versions of religious comfort okay there are a lot of versions of religious comfort including versions of christian religious comfort but the very idea that you could perform a certain deed or enact a certain ritual or do us a certain good deed or sacrifice in such a way that the creator of the universe owed you comfort is utterly ridiculous right this is just not the spiritual economy that we live in the idea that god would be impressed or bought off by what you chose to eat or not eat or the way that you chose to dress or not dress or the performance of a particular religious ceremony that frankly is an insult to the size of who god is his greatness and his majesty do you imagine that the god to whom the nations are just like the dust on the scales is bothered about that is bought off by what you choose to wear or not wear or eat or not eat or go or not go of course not the ceremonies that existed in the old testament exist not for god's benefit but for the education of the people the people twisted them assuming that god was impressed by the nations and bought off by the animal sacrifices but of course the bible was teaching over and over and over and over that's not the case solomon built the old testament temple centuries before isaiah and he says when it's completed solomon praised the prayer of dedication and says we cannot build anything that would contain you god you're too big and glorious and majestic the apostle paul when he's preaching in athens says pretty much the same thing in act 17 when he says that the god who made the world and everything in it being lord of heaven and earth does not live in temples made by man nor is he served by human hands as though he needed anything since he himself gives to all mankind life and breadth and everything here paul is surrounded by by basically godless atheistic and idolatrous people and says listen you've got it all wrong god is not served by you he's not needing stuff he is here to give to you not receive from you and here it is too god is before all things above all things he is self-sufficient in his own being he is of infinitely more value than the stuff of creation he does not need us he did not create the world or you and me to fill a void in his existence which means that he's not looking is he for us to prop him up with some grand gesture of worship we can't buy him off with religious duty as if we could twist the arm of god from whom all things amends again let me try and illustrate this point just to drive it home a bit imagine it like this imagine an eight-year-old who is trying to rent their bedroom off the parents using his pocket money right so this this eight-year-old boy he he does princess listen i'm gonna rent my room and you know what are you gonna rent your room with with my money well where's your money gonna come from oh my my pocket money oh where does your pocket money come from it comes from you who are you gonna pay your rent to well you you see there's a kind of craziness isn't there to it if he if he could even raise the kind of amount of money that he needed to it would only ever come from you right ridiculous but that's religious observance it takes the stuff that we have received from god and

assumes in a moment of madness that we can use what god has given us to pay him off it's like that was mine already what are you doing that belongs to me what are you doing isaiah says if we think like that our god is too small because god the god who is there who made the world from him and through him and to him are all things and he doesn't need you isaiah is not teaching us this though is he to make us nervous perhaps that makes you nervous about god because he's so big but he's teaching us it to bring us comfort so how does that work well think about how often we drift into this wrong way of thinking about god you know even when you've been a christian for years you can still assume can't you that somehow it's our works for him that control what we receive from him you know if things are going badly in our life you you maybe assume that you've done something wrong and if things are going well you assume that you must be being rewarded so you've got to keep this nice christian show on the road right even if it means faking it sunday by sunday now there are lots of ways of thinking like that and it's it's wrong and unhelpful isn't it but

[24 : 32] isaiah's problem with that here in isaiah 40 is it makes god too small and pretends that it can limit god's freedom that it can bind him to our will by our offerings but that's nonsense god is free is free to obey his own will he's not captive is he to ours there's nothing that we can do that place god's in god in our debt and this is the comfort of that right you see go back to that eight-year-old trying to rent his bedroom there is an instinct there which is not altogether wrong is it the eight-year-old is beginning to understand which is quite advanced for an eight-year-old that there is a cost to living right most eight-year-olds don't know that but this one seems to that the room is not there for free and so the religious person is not entirely wrong in the sense that they have seen that there is a cost to living if you and i live in god's world right if he gave us the lives that we have then we must in some sense live them for him there is a there is a cost to that there's a price to be owed and especially when you realize that you haven't actually lived to the standard of the god who made you then there's an even bigger debt to be paid isn't there there's even bigger cost of living you know you and i can't stand here and say we've lived up to our own expectations never mind up to god's and the religious person feels that debt they feel that price is owed the mistake that they make is thinking that they can pay it and isaiah 40 sort of leaves that debt hanging but then 13 chapters later in isaiah 53 you're told of a suffering servant someone who has come to pay that debt themselves and the suffering servant in isaiah is god himself clothes is himself in human flesh sacrificing his own life on the cross as the payment of the debt we could never pay here is the comfort of isaiah 40 you can't buy god off but he's already paid he's already paid so there's no righteous act that you could do to satisfy him but he has done it there's nothing that you own that you could give to purchase your relief but god has sent his son to die on a cross to pay the debt that we owe the unpayable debt has been paid through jesus christ finally then be comforted god made us we cannot make him again the logic of the passage in these last verses is inescapable if you look down at them with whom will you then compare god to what image will you liken him now god if god is the one who holds the oceans in his hand is of greater value than all creation it follows that you can't make a god from the things that you find lying around what's interesting though as you look at the detail i think is it's not just the making of idols that is being ridiculed but the making of images in other words it's not just making something and saying that that is god it's also making something and say that looks like god right it's breaking both the first commandment and the second commandment the first commandment is that we're not to worship anything else as god other than god and the second commandment is that we should not make an image in his likeness saying that we can sort of reduce god to something that we've made that looks like him because says isaiah god is incomparable there is nothing that you can make that means it's like him verse 19 and again this point is so obvious as isaiah he makes it sarcastically doesn't he look down at verse 21 do you not know have you not hurt has it not been told from you the beginning have you not understood since the earth was founded did you not get the memo people god sits enthroned above the circle of the earth and its people are like grasshoppers he stretches out the heavens like a canopy and spreads them out like a tent you can't make him it's really very simple isn't it if god is the one who is above all things makes sustains and brings to nothing all things you cannot compare him to anything verse 25 you cannot make anything draw anything or build anything or say

this is what god is like i think it's interesting in contemporary christianity that we are less and less rooted in the scriptures we've become more suspicious over time of written texts and so images start to stand in for reading the bible and studying the bible just like they did before the reformation

you know whether it's a piece of art to look at look at that and think of god or whether it's an object to hold you know hold on to that look at that and think of god or a piece of music to listen to while we let our imagination wander asking people what they imagine god to be like or what they think of when they think of god and isaiah says listen all of that is nonsense god is way too big for you to rely on your imagination god is way too glorious for you to draw him instead he says verse 26 if you want an image of god's greatness step outside on a clear night probably outside of london so you can actually see and you will see the stars of the sky and as you understand the stars of the sky through the lens of the scriptures ask yourself who made all of those who knows each one of them by name billions of stars trillions of miles away god knows them he sustains them who makes sure that not one is missing god does as i said you won't fit that into a stained glass window will you you won't even fit that into your imagination but that's what god is like alec matea puts it like this in his commentary on these verses he says that god originates everything god maintains everything in existence god controls everything in operation god directs everything to the ends to which he appoints them let's just try and apply this as we play here's the point the greatness of god's greatness that you need to understand to find the comfort of isaiah 40 you will not find in here in your imagination instead you find the greatness of god in the word of god as it explains to you who he is and what he's like as he tells you not to look to what you imagine but he tells you to look and understand who he is look at creation in the light of what he's told you and christian the point this morning is that that god the god who knows every star by name is your god he's the god of christmas he's the god of the incarnation he's the god who in verse 11 tends his flock like a shepherd gathering them in his arms carrying them close to his heart and gently leading us that's our god it's the god of the cross and the resurrection of new life by the spirit it's the god who's promised to carry us home we can't make him he made us we can't buy him he has paid our debt we can't fathom him but he knows everything about us joseph scriven was a young man with all of his life ahead of him he was from a wealthy family and he was due to be married on the night before his wedding his fiancée drowned tragically and died that full of grief joseph left ireland to go to canada to try and start a new life turn over a new league and he fell in love again got engaged again and his fiancée eliza died of pneumonia before they could marry tragedy on tragedy grief on grief it was then really in the midst of the tears and the agony and the sadness of grief that joseph got serious about living for the lord jesus he shunned his family wealth he gave it away to others especially those who were physically unable to work and he was generous and kind to those around him he learned that his mother back in ireland was dying he had no money to go and see her he had no way of returning to be by her bedside so instead he wrote her a poem with the only comfort he knew and it's the comfort of isaiah 40 this is what he wrote

what a friend we have in jesus all our sins and griefs to bear what a privilege to carry everything to god in prayer oh what peace we often forfeit oh what needless pain we bear all because we do not carry everything to god in prayer have we trials and temptations is there trouble anywhere we should never be discouraged take it to the lord in prayer can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share jesus knows fathoms our every weakness take it to the lord in prayer are we weak and heavy laden cumbered with a load of care precious savior still our refuge take it to the lord in prayer do your friends despise forsake you take it to the lord in prayer in his arms he'll take and shield you you will find a solace there well let's have a pause for us to pray on our own and then i'll pray and we'll sing in response of what we've heard so have any father we could answer yes to pretty much every one of joseph scriven's questions have we trials and temptations yes is there trouble anywhere yes are we weak and heavy laden encumbered with a load of care yes do our friends despise forsakers yes at times they do and so lord we come to you now in prayer recognizing you're the god who fathoms us we don't fathom you you're the god who has paid for our debt in the death of the lord jesus christ we could never pay you anything we have nothing to give to you you lord are the god who knows us loves us takes care of us and will carry us home and so we turn to you and trust in you and we thank you for the comfort that we've received this morning from a greater glimpse of your majesty and your glory please we pray forgive us for our small views of you forgive us not only because they're wrong but forgive us because we have carried around unnecessary anxiety grief and pain because we've had small views of you bring us comfort comfort comfort we pray as we recognize your greatness your majesty and your glory in jesus name amen amen you