

October 28, 2001 by Steve Brandon



The Teaching of the Church

Isaiah 40:12-31

In our series on the church, tonight we arrive at what I have entitled, "The Teaching of the Church." In my approach tonight, I thought about taking our doctrinal statement (or our brochure) and walking through the salient points of each of the doctrines we believe and teach. Perhaps this would accomplish our needs, but I felt like it wouldn't do justice to any of what we teach, since it would be quite superficial.

As I reflected upon "our teaching," I have become convinced that our most important teaching is what we teach about God. To have a faulty view of God is to have a faulty view of Christianity. To have a faulty view of God is to have a faulty view of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. I really believe this. If we have error in what we believe about God, we have error in our entire belief system.

I'm not the only one who believes this. It has been said in different ways by different people down through the years. ...

A. W. Tozer points out, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. ... The low view of God entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us (The Knowledge of the Holy, p. 1, vii.).

Maurice Roberts says it like this, "To go wrong in our idea of God is to go wrong everywhere else in our religion" (The Banner of Truth, July 1999, p. 1).

Jeremiah Burroughs describes how our belief about God will affect our worship. The great Puritan, said, "The reason why we worship God in a slight way is because we do not see God in His glory" (Quoted by Don Kistler in his booklet, "Why Read the Puritans Today?").

Kent Hughes notes the importance of our view of God with respect to spiritual leadership, "An immense, growing vision of God is the sine quo non, the grand distinction, the continental divide of spiritual leadership" (Disciplines of a Godly Man, p. 172).

John Piper demonstrates how a faulty view of God will distort the gospel. He says, "We need to see first and foremost that God is God--that he is perfect and complete in himself, that he is overflowing happy in the eternal fellowship of the Trinity, and that he does not need us to complete his fullness and is not deficient without us. Rather we are deficient without him. ... Unless we begin with God in this way, when the gospel comes to us, we will inevitably put ourselves at the center of it. We will feel that our value rather than God's value is the driving force in the gospel. We will trace the gospel back to God's need for us instead of tracing it back to the grace that rescues sinners who need him" (The Pleasures of God, pp. 202-203).

Walter Henrichsen describes how it will affect our Christian living. He wrote, "Every problem a person has is related to his concept of God. If you have a big God, you have small problems. If you have a small God, you have big problems" (Disciples are Made Not Born, p. 42).

In preaching on "The Teaching of the Church," I simply want to lift up to you what our God is like -- who it is that we worship and obey. For that purpose, I invite you to open your Bibles to Isaiah 40. I have chosen this text for us tonight because it gives us a great picture of what God is like.

Isaiah originally wrote these words to Judah, a nation under crisis (a little like our nation today). Isaiah sought to comfort Judah in their affliction (see Isaiah 40:1). By this time, the northern kingdom of Israel had been defeated by Assyria, who was threatening Judah as well. But it was Babylon, 100 years later, who would soon come and take Judah away to captivity. Ultimately, Israel is comforted when they are reminded of the greatness and grandeur of God.

Throughout this passage, Isaiah asks many rhetorical questions concerning God and His character. The first one is found in verse 12 and speaks of God's immensity.

Isaiah wrote, **"Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, And marked off the heavens by the span, And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, And weighed the mountains in a balance, And the hills in a pair of scales?"** (verse 12).

Obviously, the answer is God, alone. All of these things Isaiah lists merely demonstrate the Greatness of God.

1. Measuring the waters in the hollow of His hand.

Isaiah is picturing God, with all of the waters of the oceans of the world in the shallow cup of His hand. You can't hold much water in your

hand. That's the point! God is so much bigger than we are that he can hold the oceans in His palm.

2. Marking off the heavens by the span.

God can stretch out his hand (1/2 cubit in length -- 9 inches) and have it span the universe.

You know how big the universe is. You have all heard these comparisons.... If the sun were a basketball, the earth would be a small BB about 100 feet away. Pluto, the smallest planet, would be a grain of salt about ¾ a mile from the basketball. Our next closest star would be in Colorado. Our Galaxy, the Milky Way, with its billions of stars would just fit in the earth's orbit around the sun. And there are millions of galaxies. It's mind-boggling.

Yet, God's span (1/2 a cubit) can span it all!

3. Calculating the dust of the earth by the measure.

God can take the dust of the earth and measure it with his flour cups.

4. Weighing the mountains and the hills in a balance.

A scale measures the weight of two objects. God can put the mountains on one side of his scale and his weights on the other side of his scale to see how large the mountains are.

Verse 12 might easily be summed up as one children's book we have teaches, "No one is as great as God" (John Leuzarder, The Gospel for Children, p. 5). Verse 12 speaks of God's immensity.

Verses 13 and 14 speak of God's wisdom.

Again, listen to the rhetorical questions ...

"Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, Or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and [who] gave Him understanding? And [who] taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge, And informed Him of the way of understanding?" (verse 13-14).

Obviously, the answer is nobody. Nobody has ever directed or counseled or taught the LORD anything. As we sang tonight, ...

No one can counsel God all wise
or truths unveil to his sharp eyes;
He marks our paths behind, before;
He is our steadfast Counselor.
(from James Montgomery Boice's hymn, "Give Praise to God")

But the implications of these verses go far beyond the fact that God has never been taught. If nobody has ever taught God, the implication is that God has never learned anything. But furthermore, God cannot learn, because He is infinitely wise already! A. W. Tozer said it well, "He never discovers anything. He is never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything" (Knowledge of the Holy, p. 56).

Whenever God asks questions, it isn't for Himself, it is for the one whom He asked. You remember when Adam sinned, God said, "Adam, where are you?" That question wasn't for God, it was for Adam to begin to realize his shame. Or, when Jesus asked the Pharisees and Herodians, "whose likeness and inscription is on this [coin]?", it wasn't for Jesus, it was for the Pharisees and Herodians.

The next three verses again speak about God's immensity, **"Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. Even Lebanon is not enough to burn, Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before Him, They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless"** (verses 15-17).

The mightiest nation in the world ever is The United States of America. We have more wealth, more resources, more technology, more opportunities at our disposal than any culture in any time in the history of mankind.

Personally, I have been amazed with our military technology ever since the Gulf War. I vividly remember the images on the television demonstrating how accurate the bombs were. They showed the bombs not only hitting industrial buildings, but actually travelling down the smokestacks of these buildings.

Recently, I saw on the front of the Rockford Register Star a picture of some Afghan people pointing out the American military planes in the sky. They were saying, "There goes a bomber!" but were unafraid. By experience, they have come to know the precision of our bombs. Now, if those would have been German planes of World War II, the people would have been ducking for cover, because the bomb may very well hit them. But not today. Today, the bombs will precisely hit their intended targets. For the most part, civilians are safe as can be.

Yet, America, in God's perspective, is merely a drop from the bucket (blooop). As a whole, we are regarded as a mere speck of dust on the scales. In other words, as a nation, we are insignificant in God's eyes.

In Judah's time, perhaps they thought of the mighty Babylon. Babylon had a series of walls surrounding the city which were 300 feet high and 80 feet thick -- That's like a vertical football field. It was 52 miles long with 250 watchtowers situated along the wall. Each of these rose another 100 feet above the wall. As if that wasn't enough, there was a moat surrounding the wall all the way around. The Euphrates River ran under the wall and into the city, so that they never had to worry about lack of water. It has been said that they stored 20 years of food within her walls, so forget attempting to starve the city.

It is no wonder that Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, bloated in pride of "Babylon the great!" (Dan. 4:30). And yet, as mighty as that city was, to God, it was a drop in the bucket (bloop) -- an insignificant speck of dust.

Isaiah writes in verse 15, that the islands are like dust to God. What do you do with dust? You take your rag and wipe it away.

Even Lebanon, which possessed great forests, is insignificant in God's eyes (verse 16). You remember that when King Solomon built the mighty temple, he struck a deal with Hiram, King of Tyre, to obtain the cedar and cypress timber from Lebanon (2 Kings 5:8,9). Solomon sent 30,000 men to retrieve all of this lumber from the north.

Yet, as grand and glorious were its forests, even Lebanon, with all its cedars was not enough to burn. God considered it to be too small to burn. We burn matches, which are but little sticks. A stick that is too small to burn is quite small. So are the cedars of Lebanon from God's perspective.

Isaiah sums it up in verse 17 - "All the nations are as nothing before Him, They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless." Literally, the nations are "as non-existent" and "void."

In light of God's greatness, the greatest of nations can't even begin to compare with the power and might and strength of God. You cannot even begin to compare. It's like comparing the basketball talent of Michael Jordan to a baby boy. It's like comparing the musical ability of Luciano Pavarotti to my singing talent. They don't compare.

God is incomparable. That's why Isaiah brings up his next question in verse 18, **"To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?"**

In light of the previous, it should be obvious that you cannot compare God to anybody or anything! He is so mighty!

When the nation of Israel was led from captivity across the Red Sea and the pursuing Egyptians drowned in the Sea, Moses asked the same thing, "Who is like Thee among the gods, O LORD? Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness, Awesome in praises, working wonders?" (Ex. 15:11). The obvious answer to the similar question posed by both Isaiah and Moses is "nobody and nothing."

In verses 19 and 20, Isaiah shows the folly of seeking to compare God with an idol, **"As for the idol, a craftsman casts it, a goldsmith plates it with gold, and a silversmith fashions chains of silver. He who is too impoverished for such an offering selects a tree that does not rot; He seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman to prepare an idol that will not totter."**

An idol is made of precious metals....

- ... cast by a skilled craftsman.
- ... plated with gold by the goldsmith.
- ... plated with silver by the silversmith.

If you don't have enough money for a metal, you offer the next best thing --- wood. You find a tree that doesn't rot and you bring your stick to a skilled whittler. He chops and hacks at your wood and you have an idol.

We look at this and say, "foolishness." An idol is nothing but a hunk of metal or wood. But in the day Isaiah wrote, the idols of the nations were believed and trusted. In the sophistication of our day, we would never make for ourselves idols in which we would place our trust. Yet, the point is that anything else that displaces God as our trust is an attempt to compare God to something else.

Idols are the things which divert our attention away from God. Paul identifies greed with idolatry (Col. 3:5). In our wealthy society, I could make a great argument that many of us have plastic idols, which foster our greed. In some ways, my credit card is a more powerful than any idol ever was. With this piece of plastic, I can go eat anywhere I want to this evening. I can go and stay in any hotel I want to tonight. I can go to the airport, present this piece of plastic, and fly anywhere in the world that I want to go. The idols of the peoples were vain hopes at best. But our plastic works. You can prove that it works.

Perhaps our culture is past the age of idols and idolatry, but there are other idols we may have. In fact, anything that attempts to dethrone God as the Almighty Sovereign of the Universe is an idol. May God, in His grace, show us our idols....

Look further. In verse 21, Isaiah gives four more questions ...

- "Do you not know?**
- Have you not heard?**
- Has it not been declared to you from the beginning?**
- Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?"**

Of course we have known. Of course we have heard. Of course it has been declared from the beginning. Of course it has been declared from the foundations of the earth. Israel knew this. We know this.

Isaiah lays out four more facts about God in the next three verses.

1. God has authority over the earth (verse 22).

"It is He who sits above the vault of the earth." In other words, God is enthroned above the earth. He sits and the king over the earth. Psalm 113 uses the same word, "He is enthroned on high."

2. God has authority over the multitudes (verse 22).

"Its inhabitants are like grasshoppers." In other words, the multitudes are like little bugs before God, whom God can easily squash under his feet.

You remember when the spies went to check out the land of Israel. "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us. ... All the people whom we saw in it are men of great size. ... We became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight" (Numbers 13:31-33). That's the idea.

3. God has authority over the heavens (verse 22).

"[It is He] Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in."

God stretches out the heavens as easily we open our curtains in the morning. As God asked Job, "Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, and caused the dawn to know its place?" (Job 38:12).

4. God has authority over the rulers of the earth (verses 23-24).

"He [it is] who reduces rulers to nothing, Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless. Scarcely have they been planted, Scarcely have they been sown, Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth, But He merely blows on them, and they wither, And the storm carries them away like stubble."

There is nobody in the earth who is so great and mighty that God cannot bring to nothing. Even the great Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, God was able to humble in an instant. God's voice came from heaven and told him, "King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever He wishes" (Daniel. 4:31-32).

When the king is established upon the throne, it is left in God's sovereign hands how long the king will reign. Osama bin Ladin will have power only as long as God decrees. Not a moment more. Not a moment less.

Remember, God sees kings rise. God sees kings fall. Never has a king outlived God. He has buried them all.

In verse 25, yet another rhetorical question is asked, **"To whom then will you liken Me that I should be his equal?" says the Holy One."**

This is just like verse 18, "To whom then will you liken God?" This is the point of the entire passage. There is nothing that can compare to God. He is so great, so mighty, so sovereign, so powerful, so majestic, so strong, that there is nothing that can compare. Nobody can compete with God.

Isaiah continues on, **"Lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these stars, The One who leads forth their host by number, He calls them all by name; Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power not one of them is missing"** (verse 26).

Millions and millions and millions of stars were all created by speaking them into existence. Millions and millions and millions of stars all are named by God. Notice that this doesn't mean that the stars are numbered. To number the stars is different than numbering the stars. To name something means that you need to know enough about it to identify it (as opposed to another name). God knows the attributes and qualities and characteristics of each and every star. He knows enough to identify them all.

Millions and millions and millions of stars ... and none of them is lost. They all "move in the right direction -- at the right time -- with the right speed -- exerting the right gravitational pull -- shining with the right intensity" (Marv Rosenthal, Zion's Fire, March/April, 1993, p. 21). I have enough trouble with losing one of my three children, especially when the church gathers.

This is the unfathomable greatness and might and strength and power of God.

Yet, tonight, don't think that we have even begun to comprehend God's power. Again, Charnock said, "when I have spoken all of Divine power that I can, when you have thought all that you can think of it, your souls will prompt you to conceive something more beyond what I have spoken, and what you have thought. His power shines in everything, and is beyond everything. There is infinitely more power lodged in his nature, not expressed to the world. ... No man ever discoursed, or can, of God's power, according to the magnificence of it. No creature can conceive it; God himself only comprehends it; God himself is only able to express it" (Existence and Attributes of God, Vol. 2, pp. 9-10).

We have only brought forth a taste of the power of God, which, "is the ability and strength to bring to pass whatsoever He pleases"

(Existence and Attributes of God, Vol. 2, p. 13). "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Psalm 115:3). "The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all" (Psalm 103:19).

When this is your God, you can say confidently, (as we sang tonight),

God is our refuge and our strength, a present help in our distress.
We will not therefore be afraid Tho' all the earth should be removed.
Be still! Know I am God. Exalted o'er all men, Exalted o'er all earth.
The LORD of hosts with us! Our fortress strong is Jacob's God
(Psalm 46:1,2, 10-11).

When this isn't your God, you must tremble in fear, lest you upset Him. In verse 10, Isaiah writes that "His reward is with Him [i.e. for those who are His people], and His recompense before Him [i.e. for those who are not His people]."

And yet, in all of this, we haven't even begun to speak of God's moral attributes, which motivate all of His actions. We haven't even spoke about ...

His holiness ... that He is too pure to look upon sin.
His wrath ... that He punishes evildoers.
His grace ... that He extends to His elect in Christ Jesus.
His patience ... that He refrains from punishing evildoers today, but gives opportunity for repentance.
His faithfulness ... that He never forgets His promises, nor fails to fulfill them.

However, we have spoken enough to discern that God has the right, the ability, the prerogative to do whatever He wants. We ought never to question His sovereign dealings with us. We ought never to expect that God owes us anything. "We praise Him as our Lord and yet, We never place God in our debt" (from James Montgomery Boice's hymn, "Give Praise to God").

From His sovereign hand proceed all things. As Nebuchadnezzar said after his season of humiliation, "Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exult, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride" (Dan. 4:37).

This is why the cross is so glorious. God has all sovereignty in His hand. He can do entirely as He pleases. He doesn't need us. But rather, we desperately need Him.

In his book , The Attributes of God, A. W. Pink entitles his first chapter, "The Solitariness of God." He was attempting to describe how God is entirely self-sufficient with our without us.

"There was a time, if 'time' it could be called, when God, in the unity of His nature ... dwelt all alone. ... There was no heaven, where His glory is not particularly manifested. There was no earth to engage His attention. There were no angels to hymn His praises; no universe to be upheld by the word of His power. There was nothing, no one, but God; and that, not for a day, a year, or an age, but 'from everlasting.' During a past eternity, God was alone: self-contained, self-sufficient, self-satisfied; in need of nothing. Had a universe, had angels, had human beings been necessary to Him in any way, they also had been called into existence from all eternity. The creating of them when He did, added nothing to God essentially. ... God was under no constraint, no obligation, no necessity to create. That He chose to do so was purely a sovereign act on His part, caused by nothing outside Himself, determined by nothing but His own mere good pleasure; for He 'worketh all things after the counsel of His own will' (Eph. 1:11)" (A. W. Pink, the Attributes of God, pp. 9-10)."

So, why did God create all things? As our children's catechism says, "for His own glory!" In no place is His glory seen in His saving a people for Himself. In Ephesians, we read that God, "chose us in Him before the foundation of the world; ... He predestined us to adoption; ... in Him we have redemption; ... He made known to us the mystery of His will" (Eph. 1:4,5,7,9). Why? "To the praise of the glory of His grace!" (see Eph. 1:6,12,14).

The whole plan of salvation isn't primarily for us and for our own well being. Primarily, God saves people to magnify and exalt Him and His grace. That God would create a world in which there would be helpless sinners in it, who desperately needed God, ... That God would take these people, dead in sin (Eph. 2:1), and make them alive together with Christ (Eph. 2:4), ... That God would give to them, not only redemption (the forgiveness of sins) (Eph. 1:7), but also an inheritance (Eph. 1:11), ... All of this would simply magnify the glory of His grace.

Listen carefully to Eph. 2:7, "In order that, in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace, in kindness to us in Christ Jesus" In the end, our salvation is ultimately to be a giant object lesson to put the surpassing riches of God's grace on display for all to see. We have nothing to boast of. We cannot boast of grace nor faith, for both are a gift of God (Eph. 2:8-9). We can only serve the one who saved us. "We are created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10).

Yet, in our text this evening, we find Israel questioning God. Look at verse 27, **"Why do you say, O Jacob, and assert, O Israel, 'My way is hidden from the LORD, and the justice due me escapes the notice of my God?'"**

They were living in difficult times and acted as if God knew nothing of what was going on -- "My way is hidden from the LORD!" In the previous verse, we saw that God knows all about the stars. Certainly, God knows about what is happening to each of us. He simply wasn't acting upon their distress. Judah acted as if God owed them something. They thought that God had completely turned away from them.

But again, these rhetorical questions are set before us. Look at verse 28. **"Do you not know? Have you not heard?"** It wounds like verse 21. Of course they had known and heard. **"The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable."**

In light of everything we looked at concerning the power of God, He does all of this without getting in the least bit wearied. Furthermore, He completely understands the situation. The KJV is literal here, "there is no searching for His understanding." God doesn't have to go on a search to understand what is happening to Judah. There is nothing hidden from God. There is nothing God is not capable of doing.

But why didn't God step in and help Judah in their distress? He knew what was going on. He had the power to conquer the two drops in the bucket -- Assyria and Babylon. In fact, in a few hundred years, many of them would be carted off to Babylon in captivity. So why didn't God step in and help Judah in their distress?

Because the people were rebellious. You simply need to read about their rebellion in 2 Chronicles 33-36. They built high places. They built altars for the Baals. Even in the temple of the LORD, they worshipped foreign deities. They sacrificed their children. They practiced witchcraft and sorcery. They dealt with mediums and spiritists (2 Chron. 22:3-6).

They continued to rebel against the LORD and refused to acknowledge His supremacy and sovereignty. So God allowed them to be taken into captivity in Babylon.

Yet, God's promise remained true of verses 29-31. **"He gives strength to the weary, And to [him who] lacks might He increases power. Though youths grow weary and tired, And vigorous young men stumble badly, Yet those who wait for the LORD Will gain new strength; They will mount up [with] wings like eagles, They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary."**

This is a great promise of Scripture. Think of the power at God's disposal. He is the one who gives strength to the weary and power to him who lacks might. This is the message of the Bible. "God is great and we are not! We need His help!"

We need to wait for the LORD for our strength. Look at verse 31, "Those who **wait** for the LORD ...

- ... will gain new strength;
- ... They will mount up [with] wings like eagles,
- ... They will run and not get tired, They will walk and not become weary."

Obviously, God is using picturesque language here. He didn't mean that those who wait for the LORD ...

- ... would be the next class of weightlifters (in gaining new strength).
- ... would put feathers on their arms (like Daedalus of old) and fly through the air.
- ... would be the world's greatest marathon runners -- they can run and run and run and run and never get tired. Even Jesus got tired (John 4 - He rested by the well in Sychar).

This is describing a spiritual strength. This is describing the man who is able to stand firm and resist the sin around him. This is describing the man who would have the fortitude to worship the LORD in the midst of the onslaught of the evils around him.

Where does this strength come from? Look at verse 31. It comes to those "who wait for **the LORD**." How does it come? It comes by **waiting**.

The idea here is that these people wait with endurance, even when things are difficult. The perfect illustration of this is found in Psalm 27. David writes, "I would have despaired unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD" (verse 13). Then he admonishes those to whom he writes, "Wait for the LORD; Be strong, and let your heart take courage; Yes, wait for the LORD" (verse 14). The idea here is that these people wait with expectation of what God will do in the future for them.

For Israel, they were to wait and hope and trust God for the future (see verse 10). But, for us, the future has come -- when Christ Jesus came into the world. Today is not a day of waiting and hoping (though we do wait for and hope in God). Today is a day of repentance and forgiveness.

Yet, we must always keep in mind what God is like. To distort God is to distort His forgiveness. I remember a college student from N. I. U. a few years ago, who visited church for the first time in his life and Kishwaukee Bible Church. I followed up with him the next week at McDonalds. I remember him telling me what he thought God was like. At one point, he said, "Of course God will forgive me, it's His job to forgive." Whatever he knew about God was tainted. On the one hand, he knew of God's grace and mercy, but knew absolutely nothing of God's sovereignty and power. He knew nothing of the God I presented to you this evening. He knew nothing of how the Bible portrays God. By embracing a forgiving God without understanding that there is nothing in God that requires Him to forgive (apart from Christ's death for unworthy sinners) is to miss the entire message of Christianity.

You need to see God's power and purity. You need to see your own sinfulness. You need to see the necessity of another to take away your guilt. You need to repent and cry to Him for mercy. He has promised that those who believe in Christ's substitutionary atonement will find that mercy and will be strengthened in the inner man.

This is the teaching of the church.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on October 28, 2001 by Steve Brandon.
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