

“Comprehending the Incomprehensible”

Isaiah 40

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I want to start by looking at one verse in Isaiah 40. Isaiah 40:18 says [18] *To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?* This is God’s Word. The story of fallen mankind has been and is our desire to fashion a god in our own likeness for our own purposes. A book written in 2007 that already has over 20 million copies sold and on the front cover of this book it says this book may do for this generation what Pilgrim’s Progress did for its generations. That didn’t mean anything to me back then because to me it didn’t sound right and because I hadn’t read Pilgrim’s Progress. Those who know me well know that Pilgrim’s Progress has become a great love of mine. In less than two weeks the book will come out in a movie and the title of the book is *The Shack*.

The story of *The Shack* will grip you. It is a fictional story but it’s about a man named Mack who loses his daughter on a family camping trip. His daughter is abducted and murdered. Even though it is a fictional story it is dealing with important truths like where is God when evil takes place, the goodness of God, the Word of God, the church, how God saves, who God saves and all kinds of great and important themes. I would argue that it doesn’t deal with it faithfully to God’s Word and I believe it is problematic. There is a scene in the trailer where four people are standing in a beautiful field with their backs to us and it took my breath away. Three of them are supposed to be the Trinity. In the book, God the Father is named Papa and is portrayed by an African American woman. God the Son is portrayed by a Middle Eastern man and God the Holy Spirit is portrayed as a young Asian woman. It is somewhat shocking to see the Trinity depicted in that way. I know this book has helped a number of people. I did a review of it years ago which I won’t do in this study but I do want us to think about the truth of God’s Word and how great He is reflected in this great passage.

Think about this, if a movie was going to be made to depict Isaiah 40 there would be no one to play the main character and very few characters in the whole movie. Why? It is because the main character is God. Our shorter catechism says God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable as being wisdom, power, holiness, justice and truth. There is no way to depict that God even though this movie will try to do so. Normally before I bring about a study like this I talk with our pastor and run it by him but he is currently recovering from surgery so I called his son, Ike. Ike is a huge literature person so we got to talking about this idea of fantasy and fiction and not all fiction is the same.

Pilgrim’s Progress is a fictional account but it so faithful to scripture. I believe there are about two hundred Bible verses and portions of Bibles verses in Pilgrim’s Progress. All fiction is not the same so when it comes to *The Shack*, Ike said that the problem with those type of movies is they erode boundaries and blur distinctions. It is a great way to put it when something is eroding boundaries that the Scripture sets of where we can go when we think about God and that’s important. He went on to say it promises something Biblical in a way that we don’t find in the Scriptures.

In A.W. Tozer’s book *The Knowledge of the Holy*, the very first chapter is titled why we must think rightly or correctly about God. Here are a few things Tozer says why we must think rightly about God. He says ‘What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing to us. For this reason the most important question for the church today is to ask

what they believe about God. In fact for a man and a woman, what they think about God in their heart is the most important thing we can think about. It is of my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the twentieth century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the Most High God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity.' That was written in 1961.

Tozer goes on to say 'The idolatrous heart assumes that God is other than He is and in itself is a monstrous sin and he substitutes for the true God one made in his own likeness, a god begotten in the shadows of a fallen heart will quite naturally be no true likeness of the true God. Let us beware lest we think in our pride and we accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration and civilized people are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.' That is what we are coming in this study.

So how do we describe the One who is indescribable? We don't. In some ways we just fall to our knees as we humbly proclaim that You are an amazing God. We are just awestruck. There is a sense where the greatness and holiness of God leaves us speechless and that would be better than saying the wrong things about Him. In Isaiah 40, Isaiah was preaching to Judah, the southern Kingdom who had great pride and arrogance. He was letting them know that in about 150 years they would be going into captivity into the hands of the Babylonians. They would do so because of their sin and disobedience like their northern brothers in Israel.

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are dealing with the judgement of God upon Israel and what will happen to Judah with the obstinate people but there is the remnant also. This remnant are true believers that are dealing with this whole idea of captivity on the way and things crumbling around them so they are terrified and need comfort. So as we start in Isaiah 40:1 we see a proclamation of comfort from a covenant keeping God. Let's look at this passage.

Isaiah 40:1-8 says *[1] Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. [2] Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.*

[3] A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. [4] 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. [5] And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

[6] 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. [7] The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. [8] The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

There are four key things that we see in these verses. One is that it is God's will for you to be comforted. Two, His comfort is tied to our sin. Three, we must prepare our hearts for His comfort and salvation and fourthly, we gain comfort through His Word. Let's look at each of these a little more closely.

It is God's will for His children to be comforted in these dark times. Do you believe that? God wants this for us and the darkness that the children of Judah were facing where this passage harkens back to the Exodus in Egypt and also reminds us of the upcoming exile, but it is tied to all people and the spiritual bondage, the darkness and the difficulties that we are in before we come to Christ. So Isaiah says here to speak tenderly to the people of God. Comfort those who are troubled. He says to cry out to her and make her understand. Why? It is because those

who refuse to be comforted by God and His Word will find no real or lasting comfort. During tough times are the most difficult times for us to find comfort in our God.

Secondly, how is our comfort tied to our sin? It is because He comes as a conquering King. The passage tells us He will pay double for all of our sins. In other words, He is going to free us completely in a great way. Kevin De Young has written a book titled The Good News We Almost Forgot and it's his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism. This is the German Catechism written by Zacharias Ursinus and Caspar Olevianus in the 1500s. In the shorter catechism the Presbyterian church uses the first question is 'what is the chief end of man?' The answer is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

The Heidelberg Catechism is a little longer on the first two questions but very good. Kevin De Young titles the first chapter of his book that deals with the first two catechisms "Comfort My People." Why? It is because the Heidelberg Catechism asks the question 'what is your only comfort in life and in death?' The answer begins, 'that I am not my own but belong, body and soul and life and death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.' The second question says 'what must you know to live and die in the joy of this comfort?' The answer is three things. First is how great my sin and misery are. Second, is how I am set free from all my sin and misery and third how I am to thank God for such deliverance. God came to save His people from their sin. This is the deliverance He came to give His people. This is the greatest thing we need and it brings comfort to us.

Then the passage says that we must prepare our hearts by repentance and dependence. We need to prepare for the glory of the Lord. Because of the New Testament, we know that the voice that cries from the wilderness is John the Baptist. He prepares us to receive our King. The cataclysmic results of mountains being leveled, valleys being lifted, and rough places plain in this passage, reflects the incredible salvation of the Lord our God when He comes into our lives and ultimately what He will do in the new heavens and the new earth. So we prepare our hearts to receive Him by repentance and dependence upon Him.

Fourthly, we find comfort from His Word. We speak tenderly. Isaiah 40:6–8 says [6] *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. [7] The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the LORD blows on it; surely the people are grass. [8] The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.* This is a situation where words are enough. There are many time when we say 'words are not enough' but when words are used properly talk is not cheap. The words of God are exactly what bring comfort to us.

Michael W. Smith wrote a song titled *Ancient Words* and in it the lyrics says;
*Words of Life, words of Hope
Give us strength, help us cope
In this world, where e'er we roam
Ancient words will guide us Home.*

*Ancient words ever true
Changing me, and changing you.
We have come with open hearts
Oh let the ancient words impart.*

It is the reading of God's Word, not to please God but to please us to find comfort. William Bridge in his book The Lifting Up For the Downcast says, 'read, read, read God's Word until

you find comfort and if you can't read it find someone else to read it to you' because it's God's Words applied by His Spirit that gives us the greatest hope and comfort.

In this next section of Isaiah 40:9–28, we see a greatness of the incomparable God. This chapter alone reflects many of the attributes of God and we could do a whole series on just what is listed here but I'm just going to hit a few highlights. One, let God's Word speak to you about His greatness. They are not just words. They are words of God's abiding presence in us – Emmanuel, God with us and God in us. That is how God comforts us. He tells us the truth of His Word and reminds us of the reality of His presence for He will never leave us nor forsake us. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ which is in Christ Jesus who abides in us through His Holy Spirit.

Isaiah 40:9–11 says [9] *Go on 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; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"* [10] *Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.* [11] *He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.*

One time when one of my daughter's was young, her bedroom was right next to ours and I was about to go to sleep and she says 'Dad, come lay with me.' I said 'You're fine. We're right here.' Our rooms were so close there was nothing that could happen to her. She said 'Dad, come lay with me.' I said 'You're fine, everything is okay. Listen to my voice.' She said 'Dad, you come lay with me.' So I get up and before I get there telling her 'everything was okay' she was already fast asleep. Why? It is the abiding presence and she wanted to hear my voice but even more she wanted to know that I was with her. That is the Word of God where God is always with you forever. He is abiding with you, in you and comforting you.

According to verse 10 we are to behold the Ruler of All and this speaks to His omnipotence and power. The arm in this verse is a symbol of strength and He comes with His reward. This is the whole idea of His salvation. He came to His people from their sins and He is strong enough to save us. The music group Tenth Avenue North has a song titled 'Strong Enough to Save' that says;

*And He'll break open skies
To save those who cry out his name
The One the wind and waves obey
Is strong enough to save you.*

This is talking about God's strong arm of salvation that saves us. That arm is not only strong enough to save us but we see that merciful nature of that great God. We rest in the arms of our merciful Shepherd. The same arm that rule and reigns, holds, helps, comforts, guards and keeps as we see in verse 11.

There is song titled 'Held' by Natalie Grant that says;

*This is what it means to be held
How it feels when the sacred is torn from your life
And you survive
This is what it is to be loved
And to know that the promise was
When everything fell we'd be held.*

When the precious things are lost in our lives, God is holding onto us. I love how the first two sections in Isaiah 40 tie our comfort with God's strength and tenderness. He is powerful but He cares for us as a Shepherd. Let's look further in Isaiah 40.

Isaiah 40:12–17 says *[12] 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? [13] Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him his counsel? [14] 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? [15] 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. [16] Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering. [17] All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.*

The question in verse 12 answers the question is He really able to take care of us. That verse alone should remind us of that He is able to take care of us. Verse 13 and 14 answer the question, does He really know how to take care of us. In the midst of our pain and suffering does He know how to care for us? No one showed God the way of understanding and that's why we should reject all questioning of an all-knowing and all-wise God who loves us and cares for us. The unbelieving world questions a God they say doesn't exist because of His power, love, goodness, mercy and His abilities. It is best for us to keep silent rather than say the wrong thing about God, His wisdom and His goodness.

Now consider the self-sufficiency and supremacy of God which we see in verse 15 through 17. Do you ever feel like what this passage describes, like just a drop in the bucket? That's not the point of what Isaiah is trying to say here. It is not dealing with God's concern for us. The point here is that way too often our God is way too small. Isaiah is trying to help us understand the greatness of God. E. J. Young said 'His magnitude and distance have no meaning' for He wants us to understand His greatness so therefore we would tremble and repent in imagining an imaginary God.

Isaiah 40:18–20 says *[18] To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? [19] An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains. [20] 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.*

Do you see the irony in this passage here? There is this person who goes out in the woods to try and find wood that won't rot. Then he finds a great idol maker to make a god that will not move. The problem with idolatry and forming ideas about God that are beneath Him reduces Him to someone who is not strong enough to give us what we need.

Going back to the book The Shack, it does just that. In Deuteronomy 4 Moses is talking to the people of Israel about the goodness of God and how close He is to us. It says in Deuteronomy 4:7–8, *[7] For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? [8] And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?* This tells us of the goodness of God. Then He reminds us of something in verse 12.

Deuteronomy 4:12, 15–16 says *[12] Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice. [15] "Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, [16] beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female.*

A.W. Tozer in his book The Knowledge of Holy has the second chapter titled God Incomprehensible and he says this; ‘When we ask the question what is God like we must understand that we can’t answer that. It cannot be answered except to say God is not like anything. He is not exactly like anything or anybody. To think of creature and Creator as alike in an essential being is to rob God of most of His attributes and reduce Him to the status of a creature. It is for instance, to rob Him of His infinitude.’ He goes on to say ‘When we try to imagine what God is like we must of necessity use that which is not God as the raw material for our minds to work on, hence whatever we visualize God to be He is not for we have constructed our image out of that which He has made and what He has made is not God. If we insist upon trying to imagine Him, we end with an idol, made not with hands but with thoughts; and an idol of the mind is as offensive to God as an idol of the hand.’ Mental images of God don’t do Him justice and are just as bad as metal images that are fashioned by an idol maker. We need to stand amazed at His sovereignty over His creation.

Isaiah 40:21–24 says [21] *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?* [22] *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;* [23] *who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.* [24] *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.*

God sustains and upholds His creation by the Word of His power, the writer of Hebrews says and so therefore we should bow in awe to the One who is holy. These last two sections of Isaiah 40 talk about God’s holiness. There are two aspects of His holiness that are completely separate from His creation which we saw in Isaiah 40:21–24. So the second aspect of His holiness is He is completely separate from all corruption. He is pure.

Isaiah 40:25–28 says [25] *To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.* [26] *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.*

[27] *Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God”?* [28] *Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.*

Years ago I did a sermon which was my first sermon at Briarwood on Isaiah 6 which says ‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord God’ and so I titled that sermon The Aweful Majesty of God, and of course some of my sarcastic friends think its their job to keep me humble so they told me that people were saying my sermon was an awful sermon on the ‘aweful’ majesty of God. The point is that it is awe full when we think of the Divine essence of God. It is terrifying and humiliating and comforting when we think about the greatness of God. One writer said ‘Too often we replace the consuming fire with a candle flame’ instead of understanding God’s greatness.

In Isaiah 40:26–28 we are to remember His power, renounce our ignorance and embrace His wisdom. It is very hard to lift up our eyes on high and see the greatness of God when circumstances and difficulties pull us down but God wants us to understand His love and care for us. He calls all the stars by name but it says in Isaiah 49:16a, [16a] *Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.* He cares so deeply for us but when we are going through those difficult times where we feel like the people of Judah did when they said ‘why are our ways

hidden from God' we seem to think in those times God is absent or not with us anymore and that is not true. When that happens it does lead to brokenness but it's God's desire for breaking us is to break our pride so that we once again look upward to His love for us and that's where He'll strengthen us.

At the end of Isaiah 40 we have this great power to strengthen weary saints. Isaiah 40:29–31 says [29] *He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. [30] Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; [31] but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.* This shows us the idea of waiting on God is to strengthen us because He loves us.

Recently I was talking with my youngest daughter and she told me I could share this with you because it has so much to do with what I'm talking about in this study. She said 'It's been a year since I went to see the counselor.' She had had some difficult things in her past. She continued 'God has done so much in my life in this past year.' She said that since that year she had felt the closeness of God and depended on His Word. There were so many times she had felt abandoned by God and she had learned by working through it that many saints in the Bible felt abandoned by God at times. We see the nation of Judah feeling that way here in Isaiah 40, the remnant.

She went on to say that she felt that God didn't care for her even though He saved her. She thought He just put up with her but didn't delight in her. She knew the Bible said that He loved her and saved her but she didn't feel like He did and so she thought she must not be predestined or belonged to Him. She doubted her salvation. It scared her to read about Judas, the disciple that betrayed Jesus but it was His Word that she continually clung to, thinking about what His promises said to her. She realized it was her pride that was keeping her from seeing Him. It was pride that was masquerading self-pity. It was in the humbling that God did in her life that let her know that God cared for her and restored her by His Word as she trusted His truths and not her feelings.

This reminded me of one other story that I will close with. It is about a lady named Vaneetha Rendall Risner. She had 21 surgeries before she was 13 years of age. She spent years in the hospital. She was abused verbally. She was bullied. She had multiple miscarriages. The song titled 'Held' by Natalie Grant that I referred to earlier wrote the first verse of that song about Vaneetha's two month old son that had died. Her son was born with a heart problem and her original doctor had gone out of town in which another doctor came in while he was away and told her that her son was doing great, took him off all his medicines and two days later he died because of the mistake the doctor made.

The first verse of the song 'Held' says;

Two months is too little

They let him go

They had no sudden healing

To think that providence would

Take a child from his mother while she prays

Is appalling.

That is the argument against God that she said she felt initially but then it's resolved in the next line for her when it says;

This is what it means to be held

How it feels when the sacred is torn from your life

*And you survive
This is what it is to be loved
And to know that the promise was
When everything fell we'd be held.*

Vaneetha writes a lot on desiring God but to see what happened in her life after her son died, she had post-polio problem where she was going to be in a wheel chair the rest of her life. Then her husband divorced her several years later but to see her holding on to the truth of God's Word and understanding the greatness of her God through all of that tragic loss and to see the joy in her life is so encouraging. It is incredible.

That is what we come to at the end of Isaiah 40. My challenge to you in closing is to forget The Shack. Why would we look to Hollywood to tell us about the Holy One. Look to God's Word and what He has to say. His Word is faithful. Comfort and strength is inward and it comes from an outside God, above us, beyond us but who sent His Spirit to dwell within us. Jesus is our Good Shepherd to comfort us. We need to take the message of Jesus to a lost world and bring comfort to them through Him for they need Him. This study is a working to try to think about the greatness of God and who He is. I encourage you to get some good books that will tell you about the true God of the Bible. There is The Knowledge of the Holy by A.W. Tozer. There is The Attributes of God by A.W. Pink. There is For I Am the Lord Your God by our own member Ken Friday. These are available in the bookstore. They help you to find your comfort in the incorruptible God who is indescribable. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, we do thank You for Your great love for us. Thank You for sending Christ to die for us. Thank You that it is Your will and Your desire for us to be comforted. I pray Father we would lift up our eyes on high so that we may see You. Help us lift our eyes from the circumstances and difficulties that we are facing and cling to the truth of Your Word to know that in the midst of the darkest pains and difficulties we experience that we are held by You. We will give You all the praise and glory through Christ our Savior, Amen.