



God Renews

God provides strength for those who trust in Him.

ISAIAH 40:18-31

People like being compared to someone who is well respected in their given field. For example, a person who plays a sport usually appreciates being compared to an accomplished player in that sport. However, no one likes being compared to someone or something beneath him or her. Isaiah understood this truth and proclaimed that because everything is beneath God, nothing compares to Him. God alone is worthy of worship and trust, and the one who trusts in the Lord will not be disappointed.

Who is someone you have been compared to? How can a comparison be flattering? How can a comparison lead to trouble?

UNDERSTAND **THE CONTEXT**

ISAIAH 40:1–41:29

Isaiah 40:1–41:29 is foundational for the rest of the Book of Isaiah. As the people of Judah faced the future hardships of Babylonian exile, this eighth century prophet exhorted them to remember who God is. He is the God who chose them and would be with them (41:8-10). The people of God must remember that the Lord is their Deliverer and Comforter. He is omnipotent and able to save them from any threat, vindicating and rewarding those who remain faithful to Him. Their enemies would fade away and perish (40:7; 41:11-12).

As the Creator, God has both the ability and authority to do with His creation whatever He pleases (40:12). The Lord demonstrates His supremacy over the nations by His knowledge and wisdom. He knows what is right, does what is right, and does it in the right way, at the right time, to the right extent (40:13-14). God is superior to the nations because He is superior to their idols. God created the stars and calls them by name (40:26). What have the gods of the nations done? Nothing. Their gods have done nothing and can do nothing because they are nothing; those who choose to worship them are deluded (41:21-24). Everything Isaiah said he premises on the truth that there is only one God, “the Holy One of Israel” (41:20). The Lord establishes His supremacy over the nations by pointing out they are temporal while He alone is eternal (40:21). He has not abandoned His creation, especially His people. The day is coming when God will bring down the arrogant nations and exalt His people.

As a shepherd cares for his sheep, the Lord will tenderly attend to the needs of His people (40:11). God will manifest His sovereignty over all of humanity by love and not by compulsion. God’s faithful love will compel His people to respond to Him in faithful obedience. This display of loving kindness and powerful deliverance of His people will prove God’s love for His people. Those who reject Him will fall but those who trust in the Lord will soar on wings like eagles (40:31).

As you read Isaiah 40:18-31, look for the contrast between God and His creation. What do the comparisons reveal about God?

EXPLORE **THE TEXT**

LIVING (ISA. 40:18-20)

¹⁸ **With whom will you compare God? What likeness will you set up for comparison with him?** ¹⁹ **An idol? — something that a smelter casts and a metalworker plates with gold and makes silver chains for?** ²⁰ **A poor person contributes wood for a pedestal that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not fall over.**

VERSE 18

The questions of verses 18-19 arise from the truths about God in the preceding verses. The Lord comforts His people. He forgives and restores them as a loving Father who disciplines His children. The Lord will intervene for His people, and all humanity will see His glory. Life on earth is temporal, but God and His Word are eternal. He will come with strength, establish His rule, and reward those who have been faithful. He will protect His flock like a shepherd and gently lead them as if they were nursing lambs. He is awesome in power as Creator. God is also inherently holy in His knowledge and wisdom, meaning His knowledge and wisdom are far beyond human understanding. Unlike humanity, He needs no instruction; God has always been and always will be complete in His knowledge and understanding apart from external sources. The nations are nothing before Him.

Based on these truths, Isaiah challenged the people as he raised the question: *With whom will you compare God?* The Lord created all things, so who or what could compare to Him? The inescapable conclusion is that there is no other God but the God of Israel.

KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

To God we owe the highest love, reverence, and obedience (1 Tim. 1:17).

VERSES 19-20

The idols of the nations are no comparison to God, since *an idol* is nothing more than a human creation without power even to stand on its own. Isaiah described the manufacturing of a metal idol that

began with a *smelter* pouring a molten metal into a mold to form the idol. Next, the *metalworker* beat paper-thin plates of gold and covered the image with it. After that, the metalworker completed the idol by making *silver chains* for it. These silver chains may have been decorative or more likely they served the purpose of chaining it down to its pedestal or to the floor so that it would not fall over.

In verse 20, Isaiah described *a poor person* who could not afford to have someone construct him an expensive gold-plated idol. Therefore, this person looked for a skilled craftsman to carve an image out of a hard *wood* that would not rot. It would have required a great deal of effort to carve. Additionally, it needed a firm foundation so that it would not topple over by the wind or by someone bumping into it.

Isaiah highlighted the absurdity of going to so much trouble to worship what is ultimately worthless and nothing. How can such temporal things made by human hands compare to the omnipotent, omniscient eternal God who is the Creator? Idols may look impressive and be quite exquisite, but in the end they are just wood, stone, clay, or metal. Their worshipers construct them with material created by the living God.

Humanity must always recognize the infinite distance between God and His creation. To lose the distinction between the Creator and His creation is to fall into the sin of idolatry. To think of God as just another god or to compare Him with other idols is blasphemy. It is dishonoring to God's name, character, work, and attributes. Isaiah sought to show his audience that the false gods were based on delusion and absolutely no comparison to the glory of the God of Israel. Given all that God had done for His people, they should have already known this.

Why are people often more impressed by the work of human hands than all that God has done?

SOVEREIGN CREATOR (ISA. 40:21-26)

²¹ Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning? Have you not considered the foundations of the earth? ²² God is enthroned above the circle of

the earth; its inhabitants are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like thin cloth and spreads them out like a tent to live in. ²³ He reduces princes to nothing and makes judges of the earth like a wasteland. ²⁴ They are barely planted, barely sown, their stem hardly takes root in the ground when he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind carries them away like stubble. ²⁵ “To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal?” asks the Holy One. ²⁶ Look up and see! Who created these? He brings out the stars by number; he calls all of them by name. Because of his great power and strength, not one of them is missing.

VERSE 21

Isaiah used rhetorical questions to make his point. Here, the first and fourth questions go together and the two in the middle go together. Such an arrangement is common and Bible teachers often refer to it as a “chiastic structure.” It is a literary device where the biblical writer presents a sequence of ideas and then represents them in reverse order. In this instance, ideas A and B are repeated in reverse order with B and A. Normally, the idea in the middle is the most emphatic point. Isaiah’s first and fourth questions indicate that his listeners should have known the fundamental truth that the Lord is the Creator and nothing compares to Him. It is a matter of general knowledge.

BIBLE SKILL: *Compare passages with a similar theme.*

Compare Isaiah 40:21 with Job 12:7-9 and Romans 1:20-23. How do these passages point to the reality of God? What are the common themes found in these passages? What can we learn about God from His creation?

The two central questions of verse 21 get to the heart of the matter: the people's unwillingness to listen to God's word. Since God created the heavens and the earth, the people not only saw evidence that God is the Creator, but also the Lord's prophets repeatedly told them God is the Creator. Nevertheless, Isaiah's audience refused to listen.

VERSES 22-24

God is not only greater than the gods of the nations, He is also over all the nations. God sits on His throne above the earth. The *circle of the earth* may refer to the horizon of the earth or the sky above it. The vastness of God's reign is magnified by the minuteness of humanity and every other creature inhabiting the earth. Compared to God, humans are as tiny and powerless as grasshoppers that on average grow to about two inches long. In contrast, God is so great He requires the whole expanse of the heavens to serve as His tent.

Officials who sit in the highest seats of leadership among the nations may appear to have great power, but they are under the rule of Almighty God. Isaiah described the powerlessness and temporariness of world leaders using the metaphor of young plants that wither. Isaiah makes it clear that these leaders are *planted*. In other words, they do not establish themselves by their own power. It is God who "removes kings and establishes kings" (Dan. 2:21). Therefore, as impressive as Sennacherib appeared when the Assyrians invaded Judah and surrounded Jerusalem, and as imposing as Nebuchadnezzar would seem when his Babylonian hordes captured thousands of Judahites, marched them off to exile, and destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, they were nothing to God. God drove out Sennacherib, and He would bring down Nebuchadnezzar.

Sennacherib's reign lasted about twenty-five years, and Nebuchadnezzar would rule his vast Babylonian empire for about forty-four years. From a human perspective their reigns were impressive. However, God would exhale and blow them away like useless *stubble* that remained on the field after the harvest. No strenuous exertion on God's part was required.

VERSES 25-26

Verses 25-26 make up the fourth section of rhetorical questions in Isaiah 40. The questions of verses 18-20 contrasted God with the idols the people worshiped. The questions of verses 25-26 contrast

God with the heavenly hosts many of the people worshiped. Both sections communicate one truth: the Holy One is incomparable. God's calling Himself "the Holy One" conveys the truth that nothing compares to Him. God was saying that He is so transcendent—so far above and beyond His creation in every way—that it is impossible to compare anything to Him.

DID YOU KNOW?

Religions in the ancient world believed that the stars in the sky were gods. Even some Israelites during the time of Isaiah's ministry "bowed in worship to all the stars in the sky" (2 Kings 17:16).

Therefore, while the starry hosts of heaven may reveal a glimpse of God's glory, He is their Creator. They reflect His glory. Human beings can only guess how many *stars* there are, but God knows how many there are and *calls all of them by name*. It does not just mean God knows their names; it means God is the one who has given them their names. Furthermore, God is the Holy One who by His great power sustains them. Not only did He bring them into existence, but also He is the one who keeps them in existence. Consequently, as creations of the Holy One, the heavenly bodies are unworthy of worship; only their Creator is worthy of worship.

How should knowing that God is the Creator and is directing the affairs of His creation affect a believer's daily life?

TIRELESS SOURCE (ISA. 40:27-31)

²⁷ Jacob, why do you say, and, Israel, why do you assert: "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my claim is ignored by my God"? ²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the whole earth. He never becomes faint or weary; there is no limit to his understanding. ²⁹ He gives strength to the faint and strengthens the powerless. ³⁰ Youths may become faint and

weariness, and young men stumble and fall,³¹ but those who trust in the LORD will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not become weary, they will walk and not faint.

VERSES 27-28

The Lord asked His people why they complained that He had been ignoring them and had abandoned them. The grammar conveys a continual complaining. There is a hint of sarcasm as they called Him *my God*. In other words, “Supposedly, You are ‘my God,’ but what good are you to me if You refuse to listen to me?” The irony should not be lost to the reader. The God who continually sent Israel His prophets, gave them His word, dwelt among them, and saved them on numerous occasions was told by this people—who hardly ever listened to Him—that He was ignoring them.

One might expect the Lord’s response to their complaint to be harsh. Instead, God points out they needed to acknowledge what they already know and listen to what they have already heard. The God of Israel is Eternal God. He never tires, and there is no limit to what He knows and understands. They must never doubt His capability and must never assume they can understand His ways.

Why are the people of God prone to forget what they have heard and know about the Lord?

VERSES 29-31

God is capable of strengthening the failing and empowering the powerless. Even young men with vigor and strength eventually grow weary, stumble, and fall as do all who trust in their own strength. However, those who patiently trust in the Lord and look to Him for strength will not be disappointed. Rejuvenated, they will have renewed strength. Hope in the future provides strength in the present. Drawing on the Lord’s strength, the dragging one will *soar*, weary legs will *run*, and the fainting person will be able to *walk* a great distance. Soaring, running, and walking all imply forward movement. While they may move at different paces, God’s people will never be stuck. They have no reason to despair.

APPLY THE TEXT

- All idols are human creations and fall short in comparison to the one true God.
- God alone is the Creator of the universe, directing the affairs of His creation.
- God strengthens those who place their trust in Him.

Examine your life, looking for potential idols—things you place more trust in than you do God. Confess your idolatry to God as you discover each idol. What actions do you need to take to keep God first in your life?

As a group, memorize Isaiah 40:31. Discuss what difference it makes in the lives of believers when they completely place their trust in God for both the present and future. How can the group help each other to continue to place their trust in God?

PRAYER NEEDS
