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Isaiah 40:12-31

Fourth Message

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THE POWER BEHIND THE KINGDOM: DESTROYING THREATENING FOES

SERIES: A NEW SERVANT, A NEW COVENANT, A NEW AGE

Have you ever had a week when you felt buried, beat-up, and burned out? That was my experience last week. This prayer by George MacDonald eloquently expresses how I felt:

From sleep I wake, and wake to think of thee.
But wherefore not with sudden glorious glee?
Why burst not gracious on me heaven and earth
In all the splendor of a new-day birth?
Why hangs a cloud betwixt my Lord and me?
The moment that my eyes the morning greet,
My soul should panting rush to clasp thy father-feet.

A dear black man took me under his wing once when I worked on a construction site during my college days. He told me: “Some day you get the bear; others the bear get you; but then others, when the bear not only gets you, he eats you!” Living in Silicon Valley can be a stressful experience. When you tally up the score at the end of a week of dealing with public schools, politics, business or whatever, more often than not the result seems to be Lions 10, Christians 0.

In our text from the book of Isaiah today we sense there is a cloud between the nation of Israel and her Lord. Israel, as we have seen in our studies in this book, has been taken captive to Babylon. In the culture of the Ancient Near East, when one army conquered the forces of another nation, and overthrew the temple of their god, that god was considered to be dead in history. In the book of Lamentations we can sense the anguish of Israel as the captive Jews were forced to listen to the taunts of the Babylonians,

All who pass along the way
Clap their hands in derision at you;
They hiss and shake their heads
At the daughter of Jerusalem,
“Is this the city of which they said,
“The perfection of beauty,
A joy to all the earth?”
All your enemies
Have opened their mouths wide against you;
They hiss and gnash their teeth.
They say, “We have swallowed her up!
Surely this is the day for which we waited;
We have reached it, we have seen it.” (Lam 2:15-16)

Public reproach is a hard thing to bear. Israel had been overrun and intimidated. “Why is my way hid from the Lord?” they asked. Could it be possible that the Lord no longer had the power to help his people? Perhaps he had the power, but he had lost the will to deliver them.

But then, just as they had reached the depths of despair came the word of the prophet Isaiah that a new kingdom was coming by the Word and by the Spirit. Isaiah called upon the nation to clear a way in the wilderness so that they could meet their King. But Israel, languishing in captivity in Babylon, responded pessimistically. As the Jews viewed the three imposing obstacles that shed their influence

in every sphere of human activity—the nations, their rulers, and religions—they felt powerless and intimidated. In our text today, however, Isaiah weighs these formidable foes of Israel and contrasts them with the power and weight of the Lord God as Creator and Lord of history.

As we study this material together I want you to ask yourselves what are the threatening foes in your life that you find intimidating. What circumstance, bureaucracy, spiritual force, or person weighs you down and defeats you?

Isaiah begins by contrasting the glory of God with the glory of the nations.

I. The glory of God contrasted with the nations (40:12-17)

A. The glory of God as Creator (40:12-14)

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?
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?

First, the prophet says that God has measured the finite universe. “The verbs in v. 12, measure, enclose, weigh, are all different ways of describing the same process, ascertaining the capacity of something by measuring or weighing it” (Westermann). Imagine taking a measuring cup and trying to measure and count the number of grains of sand on one of our California beaches. What an impossible task! But Isaiah is not just talking about one small part of the earth, rather “the dust of the whole earth.” These three elements, waters, heavens, and dust, make up the organized universe. Isaiah then links these verbs with very insignificant human standards of measure, hollow of the hand, span, measure, pair of scales, to show that what is impossible for man is like child’s play for God. Like someone measuring out a cup of flour to bake a cake, a child’s task, God measures the limits of the universe in such simple terms.

Next, Isaiah asks who measures the infinite God. Who informed, who directed the Spirit of the Lord? he demands. This text would have been very significant to the exiles of Babylon since in the words of a Babylonian hymn, Marduk is called “the one who traverses the heavens, heaps up the earth, and measures the waters of the sea.” But, unlike the God of our text, Marduk had to consult with many gods to accomplish this.

The point here is that if man cannot comprehend the fullness (i.e. measure) of what God created, how much less can man measure the

Spirit of God which is behind the divine planning. No one possesses the capacity to measure God. No one is even in his league, so no one can offer him advice; no one is competent to judge his actions as he brings forth his plans in history. These concepts ought to develop in us a deep sense of awe and humility before our great God.

Next, Isaiah weighs the significance of the nations in comparison to the glory of God as Creator.

B. The significance of the nations (40:15-17)

**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 meaning-
less.**

In terms of a threat to the divine kingdom, Isaiah's judgment is that the nations are insignificant. In the divine scheme of things, nations that set themselves against the kingdom of God are like "a drop from a bucket, speck of dust on the scales." "When water is drawn, the drop that falls from the bucket does not matter, nor when things are weighed, does the dust on the scales" (Westermann). Nations are not considered a force to be reckoned with in the divine plan. No consideration is given to them.

Think for a moment how these words must have struck the Israelites. Babylon was protected by impregnable walls; a moat surrounded the city. But then came the prophetic word. While the Babylonians were celebrating one night, the Persian armies diverted the Euphrates river and walked into the city. Sixteen days later, on October 29, 539 BC, Cyrus himself entered the city amidst public rejoicing. So much for the impregnable Babylon. In the divine scheme of things the city's elaborate and seemingly insurmountable defenses were of no avail. For decades, the Berlin Wall was the great symbol for the captive Eastern European nations of the impossibility of escaping the chains of Communism. But then came the edict of God. In one night the wall fell, symbolically if not literally, and now it is no more.

In terms of affecting the kingdom of God negatively, the nations have no significance whatever.

Secondly, they have no moral significance to affect the kingdom of God. Supposing the City of Cupertino were to pass a tax measure to build for us a new church, with unlimited parking, and then offer to throw all the weight of the city government behind the work of PBC, would God be impressed? Look at what Isaiah says. Even if the great nation of Lebanon, the most verdant area in Canaan, and all of its possessions were offered as a sacrifice to God, it would have no moral value to move his heart to forgive sins or to affect his kingdom. Whether the nations are for or against God they can offer nothing, either positively or negatively, that will have any influence over his kingdom. The national wealth of Lebanon would not be sufficient for one daily sacrifice.

Isaiah summarizes the nations' substance, saying that when they are compared to God's greatness, they are "less than nothing and meaningless." "Meaningless" was the word used by Moses to describe the formless, void, and chaotic waters of Genesis 1:2. Thus man's greatest achievements make no impression upon God, and are no more a threat to his kingdom than the primeval watery chaos of

Genesis. In terms of a threat therefore, the nations are of no consequence; in terms of a benefit, they are without substance.

We sometimes think that if we could only conquer the bureaucracy, we could make great advances for the kingdom of God. Years ago, when Emily and I first moved to the Bay Area, our plan was for her to get her teaching credential so that she could put me through seminary when I had completed my internship at PBC. But the university bureaucracy fouled up her application to attend grad school. Two years went by and there was no resolution to the problem they themselves had caused. When I thought of my plans for seminary being put on hold, I could not help but think that the whole kingdom of God was being slowed up too! We had to stay on another year in PBC, and I ended up teaching our junior highers. But, in God's providence, at the end of that year the Elders asked me to stay on as a pastor and to regard PBC as my seminary. God in his sovereignty had worked through what we regarded as an intractable bureaucracy to get us exactly where he wanted us to be.

Thus the nations, despite all appearances to the contrary, pose no threat to God as he brings forth his kingdom. They have no substance, they carry no weight or consequence, because the Creator alone is Lord of history. Remember this when you face threatening circumstances or intractable bureaucracies in your own life.

Now we come to the second threat facing Israel.

II. The glory of God contrasted with the rulers and their idols (40:18-24)

Babylon was ruled by a mighty king. He lived in an imposing palace, measuring 350 by 250 yards, grouped around five courts. "One of these (197 ft. by 164 ft.) gave access to the throne room (156 ft. by 143 ft.) with its wall covered with glazed bricks forming friezes of garlands, palmettes and rosettes in blue, white and yellow" (D. J. Wiseman). This is the power that held Israel captive. How much weight does God give such rulers and their idols? Think of Saddam Hussein today. One million people were killed in the Iran-Iraq war through the power yielded by this man. Now he has destroyed and dismantled the nation of Kuwait. He has thrown the world into economic and political turmoil. But how much authority does he have to affect the kingdom of God?

Instead of weighing the king, however, Isaiah begins by weighing the idols which lie behind the heart of the king. Nebuchadnezzar was an idol-worshiper, and the kings of today are no different. Power, money, and greed are their idols. The prophet weighs the empty glory of idols, comparing it to the glory of God, and then he weighs the kingdom.

A. The empty glory of idols (40:18-20)

**To whom then will you liken God?
Or what likeness will you compare with Him?
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.**

Idols demand much labor and money. They require multiple skilled laborers ("a craftsman, goldsmith, silversmith"), at great expense and attention to detail ("casts, plates, fashions"). Even cheaper idols require a laborious selection of materials and skill to give them

stability. Here is Isaiah's strong polemic against the New Year festival of Babylon. Idols cannot see, hear, or speak. They cannot even stand unless they are anchored to the ground.

One idol we tend to worship today is the automobile. I saved up my pennies once and bought a new car. I bought the mechanic's manual, a wash and wax kit, and everything else I needed to keep my idol both looking and working well. When the carport next to our garage caught fire once, my first thought was not for our lives, but for my car. I raced out and drove it to safety. But once while Emily was driving, a spider fell on her lap from out of the windshield visor and she got such a shock she crashed into two parked cars. So much for my idol, I thought, if a spider can destroy it!

Next, in spite of expense and human effort, idols give nothing in return. They provide no lasting stability.

B. The glory of God as Creator and Lord (40:21-24)

**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?
It is He who sits above the vault of the earth,
And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.**

Ignorance is inexcusable. God has been properly worshiped from the beginning, and the creation declares his glory. As Lord, he sits (meaning, He rules) over his creation. He is so exalted that men appear tiny and insignificant in comparison. Occasionally we get a television view from the Goodyear Blimp of some of our major sporting events. As important as things might seem at ground level, when they are viewed from a thousand feet in the air they tend to pale in significance. Imagine how the same scene would appear if it were viewed from a satellite circling the earth. Suddenly, what we once thought to be extremely important seems puny and meaningless.

The Lord is calling on the nation to disregard the rulers of earth and their idols and instead look up to his handiwork in the heavens. Creating the universe was no more work for God than pitching a tent is for the traveler. God spread the universe out like a tent curtain to make it his dwelling. (Here we have a hint that this universe is his temporary residence.)

As Creator, look at what God does to these rulers of the earth. Isaiah 40:23-24:

**He it is who reduces rulers to nothing,
Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless.
Scarcely have then 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.**

He makes the rulers of the world of no lasting impact, and reverses their fortunes. Their glory is but a moment, and before they take permanent root, his breath (perhaps a symbol for his Spirit by which he builds his kingdom) blows upon them to destroy them. The kings of the earth suffer the same fate as the grasses on our foothills which were a glorious green just a few short months ago. Then the summer sun turned the landscape brown, and the warm winds blew the withered grass and flowers away. (See also Job 12:13-25; 34:19). There is no recollection that they were even there. A couple of years ago, I stood with a group from this church outside the palace of the Romanian dictator, Ceausescu. One of our group read the words of the prophet

Amos, "Though you build your palaces of well-hewn stones, you shall not live in them because you turn aside the poor at the gate." This was the fate of Ceausescu. He was a withering king who never got to live in his palace. This is the weight we must give kings and rulers, and this is how we should regard those who threaten us or the rule of God.

In a land replete with idols and human glory, Isaiah declares that the glory of God is not dead. He will put these rulers and their dominion in the dust. The reason, of course, is that their rule is established on the shaky foundations of idols, which are empty and vain. As God establishes his rule, Israel will be reawakened to the inviolable nature of the first and second commandments.

Having dealt with the rulers and the nations, Isaiah now comes to the religions. The Babylonian religion was an astral cult, and their gods were identified with the heavenly bodies.

III. The glory of God contrasted with the stars (40:25-31)

**"To whom then will you liken Me,
That I should be his equal?" says the Holy One.
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.**

A. As Creator of the stars (40:25)

Things haven't changed much in all the years that have passed since the Babylonian kingdom. Every newspaper and magazine today has its horoscope chart where the foolish look for advice for their problems. Our schools accept just about any kind of religious practices except Christianity. Mention the gospel and quickly the response comes, "Separation of church and state!" Workers are made to attend company seminars based on Eastern religions. Christians feel outnumbered, so we need to weigh the influence of religions against the kingdom of God. But Isaiah says we should look past the astrologers, past the stars, and ask, "Who made the stars?" The answer, of course, is that the stars and the heavens are the handiwork of God himself.

B. As Lord of History: He cares for the stars like a shepherd

God not only created the stars, he cares for them like a shepherd: He "leads, names, and protects" them. His ability to do this demonstrates his might. He not only controls an innumerable host, but he also maintains an individual relationship with each one. God promised Israel that she would have a seed as numerous as the stars. Thus, how God created and cares for the stars is a picture of what he will do for the nation. Israel would be led, named, and protected by that same might and power. They should give no weight to astrology, but instead live in a relationship with the Creator.

If God truly has the power to destroy nations, rulers, and religions, then only one question remains: "Where is it?"

IV. Spiritual renewal replaces lament (40:27-31)

A. Israel's complaint (40:27)

**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”?

God had made a covenantal promise to make Israel as numerous as the stars, and a light and blessing to all the nations. But at the time of Isaiah's writing she was but a tiny remnant overpowered by the nations and their idolatry. Where is her vindication? If God had not lost his power to do this, perhaps he had lost the will. Have you ever felt that way concerning something in your life? Here is what God says.

B. God's answer: “wait on the Lord” (40:28-31)

Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The Everlasting God, the LORD,
The Creator of the ends of the earth,
Does not become weary or tired.
His understanding is inscrutable.
He gives strength to the weary,
And to him who lacks might He increases power.
Though youths grow weary,
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.

Israel's plight is not the result of God's weakness.

He is Everlasting: His power transcends time. He is Creator of the ends of the earth: His power transcends space. Nor is Israel's plight due to God's lack of wisdom: His understanding is inscrutable.

The point is, God is waiting for Israel to undergo a spiritual transformation in Babylon. The nation needs to be broken! God wants the world's system to so overrun and defeat Israel that they will never again fight on the world's terms. He does not want us to ever think that the world system works, so he beats us up with it. Then, when we do battle, we will not be tempted to use their weapons. We must transcend the world's system, and in our weakness call upon another power, one that transcends time and space. Then we are spiritually renewed by a revival which takes place in the heart—in Babylon!

This is how David defeated Goliath. Saul told David he had no experience in battle, but David replied that he was not going to fight in the way of the world, thus he refused the offer of Saul's armor to protect him. I wish Christians today would do the same thing. We are taking on the arsenal of the world to fight spiritual battles, but we end up defeated because the world is far better fighting these battles than we are. To Goliath's question, “Am I a dog?” David replied, “Yes, and I'm an animal trainer. You are going to fight this battle on my terms, not yours.” God wants to break all of us of any confidence in the world's system, its power and glory and men of might, so that all we are left with is our voice of prayer. When the Iron Curtain collapsed we discovered that the revival had already occurred there. People in those countries had already had their spiritual transformation in exile while their kings flexed their muscles against God's kingdom.

The three great foes of Israel—nations, rulers, and idolatrous religions—pose no threat to the Lord and his majesty. The faithful need have no fear, but instead realize that the spiritual desert they

found themselves in was not due to God's lack of power, his inability to devise salvation, or his unwillingness to be available; rather it was due to their need for brokenness, so that they might cast themselves unreservedly on him and experience a spiritual renewal that would transcend time and space.

V. Implications for ministry

A. Keep the sovereignty of God central in your thinking

Throughout the text Isaiah's powerful questions ring in our ears, demanding a response: “Who has measured?...Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord?...With whom did He consult?...To whom then will you liken God?...To whom then will you liken Me?” Each question relates to God's unparalleled power and sovereignty as Creator and Lord. This truth is foundational to all else, for two reasons. First, it forms the basis of the first two commandments: the Lord alone is Lord and cannot be compared to vain idols; and second, Isaiah's rebuke, “Do you not know? Have you not heard?” suggests that ignorance of this truth is inexcusable. The point is, when these truths hold the center of our faith, many of our problems dissolve, and what we thought of as threats to our faith are a merely “drops in the bucket.”

B. Fight the right war!

Since it is God's job (and by implication, not ours) to rule the nations, we must be sure that we are fighting the right battles in life. We must do battle for the kingdom on the same terms as those which Isaiah refers to. The key to the kingdom is our spiritual transformation, not our dismantling of pagan forces by the flesh. In fact, it is in the midst of Babylon that Israel's spiritual transformation was to take place! Therefore, with a renewed vision and trust we must allow God to work out his program of worldwide salvation as the nations interact with the church. We must lay down our carnal weapons of the flesh and in our weakness take up the shield of faith and allow God to transform us spiritually. Then as we wait on him we will “mount up like eagles.” Praise be to him!

So when you feel buried, beat up, and burned out, because the score always seems to be Lions 10, Christians 0, you can pray,

From sleep I wake, and wake to think of thee.
But wherefore not with sudden glorious glee?
Why burst not gracious on me heaven and earth
In all the splendor of a new-day birth?
Why hangs a cloud betwixt my Lord and me?
The moment that my eyes the morning greet,
My soul should panting rush to clasp thy father-feet.

Is it because it is not thou I see,
But only my poor, blotted fancy of thee?
Oh, never till thyself reveal thy face,
Shall I be flooded with life's vital grace.
Oh, make my mirror-heart thy shining place,
And then my soul, awaking with the morn,
Shall be a waking joy, eternally new-born.

George MacDonald, *Diary of an Old Soul*

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