

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, use me in whatever state I am. If I am ill, then use my sickness; if I am healthy, use my well-being; if I am upset, use my sadness; if I am joyful, use my exuberance. I willingly offer all of myself to You this day, trusting that You will make sense of it all in Your good time. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Think of some feature of the news today, and explore this by searching the internet. Use the information you gather to inform your prayers.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the fellowship groups in your church.** *Pray for those people who are not in any fellowship group, but still go to church. Pray that those who need to attend will be challenged appropriately to accept the privilege of Christian fellowship.*
- *Give thanks to God for the many friends you have and the prayers they say for you*
- *Pray for the leaders of the world as they deal with the implications of the current unrest in the Middle East*

Meditation

Who can change the human heart?
Is it pre-determined, or is it flexible?
Are we fixed by nature or by nurture,
So that once we find ourselves in adulthood
There's little we can do to change ourselves:
We are the people who we are, that's it!

Listen, for God says 'no' to this!
Genes don't set the Universe in stone,
The human spirit is not restrained
By problems, sin, or by memories of the past!
Change is built inside each one of us,
So true living is liberty, when the soul is free!

The Gospel says; 'Be liberated, change!'
It calls the human heart to freedom;
Christ has changed forever hate to love,
Loss to gain, and dark to light, and fear to trust;
For when the barriers break we find our destiny
Not within ourselves, but in the very heart of God.

Bible passage - Isaiah 40:12-17

¹² Who has measured the waters in His cupped hand,
or measured the sky with a hands breadth,
or held the earth's dust in a measuring cup,
or weighed the mountains on scales
or the hills in a balance?

¹³ Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD,
or what human counsellor has advised Him?

¹⁴ Whom did He consult to gain discernment,
or taught Him the way of justice?

Who taught Him perception,
or trained Him in understanding?

¹⁵ Look, the nations are as a drop from a bucket,
and are reckoned as dust on the scales;
see, the weight of the coastlands is as fine dust.

¹⁶ Lebanon could not provide enough fuel,
nor its animals enough for a burnt offering.

¹⁷ All the nations are as nothing before Him;
He reckons them as less than nothing, or empty.

Bible Study

Review

Isaiah 40 has begun an amazing series of prophecies by Isaiah which declare a message from the very courts of God that He is coming to be with His people to bring the 'Good News' of His presence (40:5,9). The message is remarkable and awe-inspiring, and having delivered this, Isaiah goes on to speak in a visionary manner which is no less awesome about the greatness of the God he is speaking about. Isaiah did not perceive himself as like other professional prophets of the day who were hired by kings to perform ritual tasks and largely to tell them what they wanted to hear. Isaiah had set himself apart from all such false prophetic nonsense (as you can discover elsewhere, e.g. Jeremiah 26-28), and in his mature years sought only to speak words which came from God alone, the one God, Creator of heaven and earth.

In the rest of chapter 40, Isaiah spoke about the nature of the God Israel worshipped; He was the creator of all things and uniquely interested in all human affairs, especially those of His people. The Israelites and Judean people had constantly been tempted to believe in all manner of gods believed in by other people who lived around Israel, principally the traditional Canaanite 'ba'als'. Isaiah had spoken about these since his youth, condemning them and the ridiculous way in which they were worshipped; 'Their land is filled with idols, they bow down to the work of their hands; to what their own fingers have made!' (Is 2:8). For Isaiah, the difference between human religion and its many manifestations and the God in whom he believed was that his God was responsible for the whole of creation, and He was the Creator whereas people were merely His creatures. This sounds so easy to say, but the ramifications of this are enormous. They blow away all human pretension and idolatry and place God back where He should be, on His throne, the Author of all things to be worshipped and adored.

This spirit of worship of the Creator God pervades this whole passage, as Isaiah 40:12-31 answers three rhetorical questions asked about the God revealed in Isaiah 40:1-11, and each question is addressed by a different section of the remaining prophecy in chapter 40. Who is this Creator God? (see 40:12-17) Why is God not like other gods? (see 40:18-24) And what is this God like? (see 40:25-31). We will look at each of these in turn, but today's passage clearly describes God as Creator, and as such it is a valuable passage of scripture which should be read alongside other famous 'creation' passages (Genesis 1,2; Psalm 8, Job 38-41). Indeed, you would be justified in asking whether Isaiah knew the book of Job or whether the writer of Job knew Isaiah, when you read verses such as this from Job;

*'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?' (Job 38:4-5)*

In our passage today, Isaiah reinforces the idea of God as Creator by asking a supposed enquirer whether anyone could possibly comprehend, calculate or measure the immensity of creation (40:12)? Who might know the extent and range of the power of the Holy Spirit (40:13), or be able to account for the nature of wisdom or justice (40:14)? Or who could evaluate how God estimates the sand on the sea-shore or the forests of Lebanon, or even all the animals used to sacrifice to Him (40:15,16)? In comparison to Almighty God, prophecies Isaiah, the nations are little more than the chaos which ruled in 'nothingness' before creation began (40:17)!

There are times when the Lord's people need to be reminded of the awesome power and majesty of the God in whom they believe; and this prophetic word reminds them of His true nature. Isaiah prophesied that He was coming to save His people and bless them, but they should not forget who He was!

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Measuring God's Creation
- Who taught God?
- Valuing the world

Notes on the text and translation

V13 'Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord'

Most versions have 'Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord?' The verb here is the same one used in the previous verse, meaning 'to measure' or 'survey', and the idea is all about what can be known of the mysterious Spirit of God. However, translators have tended to follow the ancient 'Septuagint' (Greek version, 2nd century BC) which links this half of the verse with what comes next and translates the verb as to 'understand' or 'control'. Personally, I think it makes perfectly good sense as it stands in the original Hebrew text.

V13 'Or what human counsellor has advised Him?'

Again, this is different from most versions, and brings out the use of the Hebrew word for 'man' ('ish') attached to the word for 'counsel' which I have translated as 'human counsel'. Isaiah is asking the question whether any 'man' has advised God on His actions! The answer of course is 'No'!

V14 'Whom did He consult for His discernment'

The usual word used here is understanding, but the Hebrew word ('bin') has more to do with perception and discernment than the generalised idea of 'understanding'. The normal Hebrew word for understanding ('tebunah') occurs at the end of the sentence at the conclusion of the sequence.

V17 'He reckons them as less than nothing, or empty.'

Note that the word for 'empty' is the same Hebrew word 'tohu' used in Genesis 1:2 to describe the chaos before God created the earth and the heavens!

Going Deeper

In studying this passage further, we will take the major sub-divisions of this text; God's measurement of the universe (40:12), His wisdom and understanding (40:13,14) and lastly, His relationship to the created order (40:15,16,17). Each section has a few things to say to us about our own presumptions about human ability, even in today's scientific world, and the awesome majesty of God.

Measuring God's Creation!

Verse 12 of our passage is all about 'measuring'. Different translations of the text use other words to try and make more sense of the text (see above) but the main point Isaiah makes in this rolling piece of poetry is that the ability to measure the extent of the Universe belongs to God alone. He is the Maker of the world, and all our efforts to assess the full extent of creation is limited by our place within creation. We are not in a position to stand outside our world and observe it, to use 'scientific' language, because we are not the world's Creator. As the one who made the world, only God can measure it or knows what such measurements may be. In its own day, this was as good an argument as you could get for God as Creator, and it stands today, except the argument has lost some of its force because of our assumptions about 'science' today.

In our own time, people will easily say that physicists and astronomers have indeed measured the Universe, and any student of physics might be asked to calculate the number of air molecules in the atmosphere or the amount of water on the earth (I recall questions of this nature in my Physics degree papers many years ago now!). However, although Physics and science in general has proved to be highly successful in generating ideas which have been used to produce amazing technologies which we use all the time (including the internet), when it comes to our knowledge of the Universe as a whole, there are problems. We enter a specialised world full of assertions and assumptions, theories and propositions all of which are competing to make the next step forward in our understanding of things; steps we already know will only expose further gaps in human knowledge about the world in which we live. It would simply be untrue to suggest that physics and science can simply 'measure' the created world. However magnificent are the things we already know, God lies further than we have been, and we have not yet understood how the Universe came into existence, quite apart from why the planet on which we live supports our lives! We do not yet know how to assess the sand on our sea-shores in relation to the rest of the matter of the Universe!

Some people regard the questions of Isaiah 40:12 as trivial and irrelevant, but I suggest that they simply point us to what all scientists know; which is that there is no end to knowledge. No one has yet grasped all there is to know about our planet with the mind of one who could understand it all, let alone create it; only God!

Who taught God?

Beyond the fact of the existence of our world lies the extraordinary fact of morality. 'Right and wrong' are inbuilt into the universe in a spectacular way, each affecting change and feeling amongst people who live on earth. The more you think about it, the more incredible it is that whilst many things about life are indeed quite 'relative' and dependent upon where you are and what you are doing, a lie is a lie, and hatred is still hatred, and love is still love. We live in a moral world which God has made; and there is little explanation or reason for this except God Himself!

When Isaiah said 'Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord', he took the theme of measurement from the previous verse and carried it over to God Himself. Can we measure or understand not merely what morality is, but why it exists and what purpose it serves? The Spirit of God is the Lord 'at work' in the world; can we measure this? 'What human counsellor has advised Him? (40:13). Isaiah presents a fascinating moral compass within verse 14. The very idea of justice lies with God Himself, and His 'discernment' is absolute; the understanding and perception of the human mind is a gift of God which is given to us by means of the Holy Spirit! All knowledge is wrapped up in God, and the structures of morality and justice with which we work to make our societies comes from Him alone. This is because He is our Creator!

How extraordinary it is that people think they know better than God! Yet all of us live on a daily basis by making decisions we think of as being in our best interests. Isaiah was someone who could see that being 'right' about things ('righteousness') was something God could perceive but people do not always see. Because of this, the only way for us to get things right is for us to be in touch with our Creator God. Of course, Isaiah's message was that God was coming to His people precisely to give them the benefit of His righteousness! Ultimately, all people face the question about whether they are willing to accept their morality from God instead of trying to create it for their own ends.

Valuing the world

'Look, the nations are as a drop from a bucket, and are reckoned as dust on the scales ...' (40:15f.). People cannot place value on what they find in this world, says Isaiah, only God understands the true relative value of the sand, the sea, the forests of Lebanon or even (as in verse 16), the sacrifices offered in worship!

In saying this, Isaiah went to the heart of the problems God had with His people, and why they had lost track of the God who made them and upon whom they were dependent. They believed that if they sacrificed animals in worship as set down in the laws of Moses, and continued to do those things commanded at the time of the Exodus, then God would be pleased with them, whatever they did. Isaiah had seen through his own life's experience that when people thought they had done enough for God, it was just an excuse to allow them to do what they wanted apart from God. In other words, they had no real sense of the value of their worship, or of their sacrifices or festivals. Isaiah had proclaimed from the beginning of his ministry that unless worship represented the offering of the whole heart (1:5f.) then it was not enough; God's evaluation of people's worship was not what they expected 'Lebanon could not provide enough fuel (wood for fires) nor its animals enough for a burnt offering ...' (40:16).

The awesome majesty of God is such that the things we hold dear and of value are as nothing before Him, and this is the starting point for everyone who wants to know the nature of our Creator God. In order to emphasise this, Isaiah finished with an astonishing comment; 'all nations are as nothing before Him ...' The prophecy sounds awful, as if we mean nothing to God, but this is not true. What Isaiah was doing in this prophecy was to rectify the balance of understanding between God and His people. The great prophecy of Isaiah 40 began with the amazing promise of God to 'comfort' His people, yet unless these people were prepared to understand the true nature of their Creator God they would be deluded.

Application

The challenge of this passage is firstly to accept the awesome magnificence of God and the complete inability of humanity to fathom the extent of the One who can both make the Universe and also breathe life into a human soul. The second challenge is to accept that this same God comes in love to 'comfort' His people and bring 'Good News' destined for the entire world! In the traditions of the church, we speak of God's 'transcendence' and 'immanence'. To describe God as 'transcendent' means that He is as we have seen today, awesome in power and majesty and utterly beyond our understanding or grasp. To say that God is 'immanent' means that He is able and willing to have a personal relationship with us and lead us personally on our path of life. The true mystery of God is that He is both these things, at the same time!

In our church life, it is natural that we should give thanks to God for the relationship we have with Him through Christ, and much worship today appeals to that sense of the presence of God which is deeply moving and for many people physically as well as spiritually tangible. However, the Christian faith begins with the acknowledgement of God as Creator, and the awesome reality of God who has made the world, morality, justice, people, worship, animals, personality, mathematics, birds, viruses and absolutely everything we can comprehend and a great deal more beyond the limits of human perception. Sometimes, it does us good to remember that our God is this big.

The great visions of Isaiah begins with a picture of God's immanence ('comfort, yes, comfort my people ... – 40:1f.) and then His transcendence ('who has measured the spirit of the Lord ...' – 40:13). Isaiah reminds us that He is both, and we will certainly grow in faith if we remember this.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In what ways do we celebrate the overwhelming greatness of God in our worship today?
2. How should we worship a God who is so vast that He knows everything about us before we even open our mouths?
3. Discuss in your group what you feel is the most telling picture within this prophecy, and one which speaks to people today.

Personal comments by author

The awesome majesty of God is something very hard to describe. In writing this today I have felt awkward at times because of the sheer limitations of my own ability to write and describe the indescribable. The poetry of Isaiah is beautiful, and should be read as it is, but we do need to know what it is saying, otherwise people just read texts such as this and say 'Oh yes, how awesome' without really understanding the truth of what they are saying.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Spend a day or two fasting (missing a meal or two as you feel it best to fast) and concentrate on the awesomeness of God and His transcendence. Let yourself be carried away in the heart and the imagination and worship the Lord!*
- *Write down a few verses of poetry yourself which express the majesty of God; start with a line from Isaiah, and allow yourself to add words of glory and praise to our great God. See where this leads you, and give thanks to God.*

Final Prayer

Holy Spirit, dwell in my heart; Holy Spirit, convict me of my sin; Holy Spirit, encourage me in faith; Holy Spirit, stay with me on the way; Holy Spirit, fill me anew. Jesus, send me Your Holy Spirit, now and always: AMEN
