

February 4 Lesson 10 (NIV)

Faith in the Power of God

Devotional Reading: Romans 4:9–22
Background Scripture: Isaiah 40:12–31

Isaiah 40:12–13, 25–31

¹² **Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,
or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?**

**Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,
or weighed the mountains on the scales
and the hills in a balance?**

¹³ **Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD,
or instruct the LORD as his counselor?**

²⁵ **“To whom will you compare me?
Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.**

²⁶ **Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:
Who created all these?**

**He who brings out the starry host one by one
and calls forth each of them by name.**

**Because of his great power and mighty strength,
not one of them is missing.**

²⁷ **Why do you complain, Jacob?**

Why do you say, Israel,

**“My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?**

²⁸ **Do you not know?**

Have you not heard?

**The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.**

**He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.**

²⁹ **He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.**

³⁰ **Even youths grow tired and weary,**

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

Key Text

He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.—Isaiah 40:29

Faith That Pleases God

Unit 3: The Righteous Live by Faith

Lessons 10–13

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- A. No Shortage Here!
- B. Prayer
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How to Say It

AzariahAz-uh-rye-uh.

Babylon*Bab*-uh-lun.

HezekiahHez-ih-kye-uh.

Isaiah Eye-zay-uh.

Judah/oo-duh.

Messianic Mess-ee-an-ick.

omniscient ahm-nish-unt.

Psalter Sawl-ter.

Sennacherib Sen-nack-er-ib.

Septuagint Sep-too-ih-jent.

Uzziah Uh-zye-uh.

Introduction

A. Taking God to Court

Back in 2007, Nebraska state senator Ernie Chambers filed a lawsuit against God. Chambers was seeking a permanent injunction against God, whom Chambers blamed for causing various natural disasters. The lawsuit further accused God of the crime of failing to stop “terroristic threats.” Chambers stated that he had tried to contact God about these matters on multiple occasions, but without success.

This man knew that he had no hope of winning a lawsuit against the Almighty. He filed the lawsuit in an attempt to make a broader point about the wastefulness of frivolous lawsuits.

The Bible offers us various word pictures of God’s heavenly courtroom. Certain passages are narratives regarding the individuals who are present: one or more of judge, jury, prosecutor, victim, defendant, etc. (examples: Job 16:19–21; Psalm 89:37; Matthew 19:28; Revelation 11:18; 19:19–21:8). Also suggested are locations in the courtroom: a judgment seat, a witness stand, etc. (examples: Job 40:2; Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10). These serve as warnings regarding who is susceptible to judgment and who is not.

B. Lesson Context

Today’s lesson comes from the writings of the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. His text is the first in a group of five referred to as the Major Prophets; those five are the books known as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

We may wonder what value the Old Testament books of the prophets still have in the New Testament era. After all, the days of those prophets are long gone, and we’re under the new covenant, not the old (Colossians 2:14). The value of the prophets today is firmly established in how many times they are cited by Jesus and the authors of the New Testament. One clue to their value today is to be aware of how often these books are quoted in the New Testament. By one

count, the tallies are Isaiah (67 times), Jeremiah (5 times), Lamentations (0 times), Ezekiel (2 times), and Daniel (5 times).

These figures reveal the continuing relevance of the book of Isaiah. It has been called “the fifth Gospel” because of its numerous prophecies declared as fulfilled in the messianic era of the New Testament (examples: Isaiah 6:9–10 in Matthew 13:14–15 and Mark 4:12; Isaiah 53:7–8 in Acts 8:32–33).

Isaiah prophesied during some very dismal times for God’s people. His prophetic call came “in the year that King Uzziah died” (Isaiah 6:1; compare 2 Chronicles 26:22), which would have been 740 BC (see 2 Chronicles 26; Uzziah is also known as Azariah in 2 Kings 15:1–7). The final historical event recorded by the prophet is the death of Sennacherib, which occurred in 681 BC (Isaiah 37:38). That makes for a lengthy period of ministry!

The text under consideration in our lesson follows a prophecy that warns King Hezekiah of Judah regarding a time when Babylon would carry away Judah’s wealth and people to Babylon (Isaiah 39:5–7); more than 100 years would pass before that happened, but it indeed *did* happen. This was a punishment from the Lord for the people’s sins, followed by “comfort” in declaring that that punishment would eventually end (40:1–2). The predictions that immediately follow in Isaiah 40:3–5 shift forward more than five centuries for fulfillment, quoted in Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4–6; and John 1:23.

The passage of time from pronouncement to fulfillment of these prophecies makes for valuable study. But the study in today’s lesson takes us beyond time-bound prophecies in considering the timeless nature of God himself.

I. Supreme Ruler (Isaiah 40:12–13)

A. Overseeing Creation (v. 12)

12a. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?

Today’s text comes to us in the form of Hebrew poetry. This style often involves balanced lines known as *parallelism*. This means expressing the same thoughts across different lines using different words (synonyms).

We see that parallelism here regarding the verbs *measured* and *marked off*. Both expressions deal with calculating something. Additional parallelism occurs with the phrases *hollow of his hand* and *the breadth of his hand*. The latter refers to the distance from the end of the thumb to that of the little finger when these are extended—in other words, about nine inches (compare 1 Samuel 17:4).

The words translated *waters* and *heavens* occur together about three dozen times in the Old Testament; most closely aligned with their usage here are Genesis 1:20; Proverbs 30:4; and Amos 9:6. Isaiah uses this imagery to call attention to things God can do that humans cannot. The rhetorical questions being posed are similar to those that the Lord confronted Job with (see Job 38–41). Of particular interest in light of the half-verse under consideration is Job 38:5. Modern science allows us to make educated guesses regarding the volume of water in the oceans and the

vastness of space in light years. But whatever the unit of measure, no human device can determine those things with exactness. Only their Creator can do that.

Through rhetorical questions, the prophet provides his reader with the proper perspective of God. The human mind cannot fathom the amount of water in the ocean or the distance of one galaxy to another. However, the Creator can measure the distance using his hand. In this verse, Isaiah declares the greatness of God and lays down the basis of the criteria by which the Israelites may compare their God to the gods of other nations.

12b. Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?

Isaiah's question has an answer so obvious that it should not have to be stated. The verb translated *held* implies something like "contained" (compare its translation in Jeremiah 2:13 concerning "broken cisterns that cannot hold water"). Parallelism continues between *mountains* and *hills* as well as *scales* and *balance* (compare Job 38:18).

B. Possessing Full Knowledge (v. 13)

13. Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD, or instruct the LORD as his counselor?

The Hebrew word translated *Spirit* has a range of meanings. It can mean "wind" (Isaiah 7:2), "breath" (11:4), or what might be called "attitude" (4:4), among other meanings. Context determines what the writer means at any given point.

The importance of this verse for the New Testament era is seen in the fact that the apostle Paul quotes it twice (see Romans 11:34 and 1 Corinthians 2:16). Paul uses the word *mind* rather than *Spirit* because he is quoting from the Greek version known as the Septuagint. Even so, his understanding of what the passage says about God is entirely consistent with Isaiah's: God has never had to learn anything from anyone. God is omniscient, meaning "all-knowing."

Isaiah 40:14–24, which comes between the two segments of our lesson text, continues the prophet's confrontational questions. These include declarations of the Lord's superiority to the nations (Isaiah 40:15–17), idols (40:18–20), and earthly rulers (40:23–24).

II. Sustaining Ruler

(Isaiah 40:25–31)

A. Regarding His Identity (v. 25)

25. "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.

The prophet raised this question earlier, in Isaiah 40:18. It reminds us that we should be extremely cautious with statements that start with "God is like ..." because the next word will result in the Creator's being compared to something he has created.

Even so, Isaiah's question *To whom will you compare me* does not forbid certain figurative language from being used as illustrations of God's various roles. These roles include his being a shepherd (Psalm 23:1), a rock (2 Samuel 22:32), a shield and a sword (Deuteronomy 33:29), a fortress (Psalm 18:2), and even that of a winged and feathered creature (91:4). These are not

saying that God's essence is similar or *equal* to any of those; rather, such texts illustrate various functions that God exercises.

The designation *Holy One* is used especially by the prophet Isaiah (30 of its 45 occurrences in the Old Testament). This frequency may be linked to the impression that Isaiah's prophetic call made upon him. In that commissioning ceremony, he saw the Lord "high and exalted" and heard the seraphim cry, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty" (Isaiah 6:1–3).

B. Regarding His Abilities (vv. 26–28)

26a. Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one

Isaiah calls attention to *the heavens* as he did previously in Isaiah 40:12 and will do again in 51:6. Worship of *the starry host* was explicitly forbidden (Deuteronomy 4:19), but it happened anyway (2 Kings 17:16; 23:5), with promised punishment that followed (Jeremiah 8:2). Avoiding such idolatry begins with realizing that there's a Creator behind these stars (Nehemiah 9:6). To worship created things rather than the Creator is to invite the death penalty (Romans 1:18–25, 32).

26b. and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

Elsewhere, the Bible records the *name* of some stars and their constellations (Job 9:9; 38:31–32; Amos 5:8). Whether covered by clouds or not, they are in the night sky every night without fail. Modern astronomy sometimes lets us predict with general accuracy the very rarely seen explosion of a supernova (see lesson 5 regarding the difference between astronomy and astrology). By one count, there have been only seven such explosions visible to the naked eye throughout history.

And even these may have involved stars invisible to the naked eye before their demise; thus, the ancients would not have perceived any stars that failed to appear.

27. Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God"?

Again we have the parallelism that typifies Hebrew poetry: the verbs *complain* and *say* parallel one another, as do the proper names *Jacob* and *Israel* (see Genesis 32:28; 35:10; 46:2). The parallelism continues with the phrase *my way is hidden* mirroring *my cause is disregarded*; then the phrase *from the Lord* echoes *by my God*. Thus one overall thought is expressed, not two. Nothing is hidden from God's sight (Jeremiah 16:17; 23:24; Hebrews 4:13).

28. Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

Do you not know? Have you not heard? are favorite expressions of the prophet Isaiah (see Isaiah 37:26; 40:21). In this case, they respond to the rhetorical questions of the verse previous to this one. The implication is that nothing is ever concealed from God. It's inconceivable that the reader should plead ignorance to the facts that follow. Even without having the benefit of

Scripture, God's characteristics are discernible from nature itself (compare Romans 1:20). Thus, Isaiah should not have to remind the people of truths with which they are already familiar.

The writer offers a rare collection of terms in using different Hebrew words for *God*, *Lord*, and *Creator*. This collection is the only place in the Old Testament where the three words are seen together as nouns; it seems that the writer wants no mistake to be made regarding the identity of the subject! God is not susceptible to human limitations. He does not tire; he never becomes exhausted; he neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4). That God rested on the seventh day following the six days of creation (Genesis 2:2–3) does not imply that he became *weary*; it simply means that he ceased his creative activity.

At this point, we should take special note of how Scripture uses the word *weary* in different contexts. In the text at hand, that word is used with reference to God's "running out of energy"—which doesn't happen. In Isaiah 1:14, on the other hand, the prophet uses the word in the sense of God's "being fed up"—which definitely *does* happen (also Isaiah 43:24; Malachi 2:17).

These truths expressed in this passage and throughout the Scriptures concerning the Lord and his uniqueness are why prophets such as Isaiah speak so passionately against the sin of idolatry (example: Isaiah 40:18–20). Idol worshipers do no harm whatsoever to God, who remains the same *everlasting* God described by Isaiah. They harm only themselves by following such delusions.

C. Regarding Our Need (vv. 29–31)

29. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.

The promise of *strength* from the Lord, especially during times of human frailty and weakness, resonates throughout Isaiah (Isaiah 12:2; 25:4; 26:4; 41:10; 45:24; 49:5) and is found in numerous passages of the psalter (Psalms 18:32; 22:19; 28:7–8; etc.). The issue is one of trust since God has his own timetable for replacing our weakness with his strength. Trust requires waiting (Isaiah 8:17; 25:9; 33:2; 40:31 [below]; 49:23; 64:4).

Few have experienced more acutely the need for—and receiving of—strength from the Lord as did the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 1:8–11; 6:3–10; etc.). His declaration, "I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13) rings true for us today.

30. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;

Youth is often associated with vigor and endurance, something that diminishes with age. But certain situations arise that leave even *youths* disheartened and fearful of what lies ahead. Physical strength is an asset that can prove useful in numerous situations. The ability to do more than expected can last only as long as the adrenaline does. But inner spiritual strength from the Lord is what provides the endurance to resist the temptations frequently encountered in a world broken by sin. Thus could Paul boldly declare, "We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16).

31. but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

We now come to some of the most well-known declarations in all of Scripture. We see them displayed artistically on coffee mugs, tapestries, desk mementos, etc. The need to *hope in the*

Lord is found in many places (examples: Psalms 37:9; 123:2; Isaiah 8:13; Romans 8:25). To hope implies trust in the Lord. An example of impatience and failure to wait is Abraham in Genesis 16. When we wait, we keep faith that God will work his purpose in our circumstances, even when—or especially when!—the way forward is not obvious to us. But waiting does not come easily in our fast-paced society that often demands instant results. Our tendency all too frequently is to act on our own timing and by our own judgment; we want to keep things moving!

The imagery of mounting up *on wings like eagles* pictures an ability to soar into the sky, oblivious to any potential distractions below. The Lord used that same imagery when he established his covenant with the nation of Israel. He contrasted what he did to the Egyptians with “how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exodus 19:4). Later, Moses used similar imagery to remind the people of God’s special care (Deuteronomy 32:11–12). Isaiah’s words yet apply today.

The concluding *they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint* offers yet more instances of parallelism in expression.

Conclusion

A. No Shortage Here!

When the impact of the coronavirus pandemic began to be felt during the spring of 2020, one result was shortages in various commodities. Issues with business closings and logistical limitations meant that goods were not as readily available as before. Stores simply ran out of certain items, even after limiting purchases per customer. Many consumers found themselves frustrated at being unable to purchase the things they wanted (or outright *needed*) with the convenience to which they were accustomed.

Our passage for today reminds us that the God we worship and serve has never been subject to any kind of weakness, attrition, or scarcity in his resources. The prophet’s affirmations of God’s incomparable sustaining power and of his promise to provide strength to those who grow tired or weary have no expiration date. God’s power and strength are indeed available to us today! But here, a caution must be interjected concerning what the Chronicler records: “The Lord is with you when you are with him. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will forsake you” (2 Chronicles 15:2). The only restriction regarding our access to God’s resources is our own sin and unwillingness to trust him.

B. Prayer

Father, we thank you for the record left to us by the prophet Isaiah! May we realize fully that, with the New Testament, we now have immeasurably more insight into your nature than Isaiah did! Help us to take neither you nor your Word for granted. Renew our strength as only you are able to do. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

There is never any power shortage with God.¹
