

“The Gospel according to Isaiah: God and Creation”

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Brian Watson

True story: In February 2018, I flew to Louisville, Kentucky. I was traveling to Southern Seminary to take an entrance exam and interview for their PhD program in philosophy. (This summer, I decided to transfer to Southeastern Seminary near Raleigh, North Carolina to work on a PhD in their Philosophy of Religion program, but that’s another story.) I got a Lyft from the airport to the hotel where I stayed. Lyft is like Uber; it’s a ridesharing service. If you have a smart phone, it’s easier and cheaper to use Uber or Lyft than it is to catch a cab.

Whenever I take Uber or Lyft, I try to make conversation with the driver. On this occasion, the driver’s name was Alphaeus. He was playing good music and he was friendly in a very relaxed, laid-back kind of way. I asked him how much he drove for Lyft. He said he did it only part time, because he was also an actor. I wondered what kind of work an actor would have in Louisville. He said he had worked on a couple of movies. Of course, that got me curious. Which ones? He told me he was in a movie called *Columbus*, which was filmed in Indiana, and that he had recently done work on a movie that was going to be released soon. The movie was called *The Old Man and the Gun*, which filmed in Ohio and starred Robert Redford and Danny Glover. I remember that I asked which of those men was the old man of the title, and we joked about how those two old men needed to sit down between takes. When I got out of the car, I asked Alphaeus for his last name. He said it was Green. I made a mental note to remember his name and the movies that he was in. Then I wished him well in his career.

Well, I finally got a chance to see Alphaeus on the screen this past week. I watched *The Old Man and the Gun*, because it was free on a streaming service I use, and because it received good ratings. In the movie, Robert Redford plays a bank robber, the old man with the gun. As I watched the movie, I kept my eyes out for my friend. I didn’t have to wait long. There’s a scene where a robbery detective, played by Casey Affleck, goes to a business that’s been robbed. Alphaeus plays the owner of the business who talks to Affleck’s partner. He has two lines, but he’s barely on the screen. In fact, you can’t even see his whole face, because the camera is focused on Affleck. Still, he was in the movie, I’m sure he was paid for his work, and he’s in the credits. And that’s pretty cool. I can’t say that I’ve meet too many people who’ve acted in movies.

Alphaeus didn't lead me to believe he had a large role. In fact, he was very humble about his work. But what if he said that he starred in the movie? What if he led me to believe that his role was just as big as Robert Redford's? When I watched the movie, I would have thought, "Wow, Alphaeus didn't have a very accurate view of his role. He thought the movie was about him. But it's not. He just played a small, very short role."

Why do I tell that little story? Because I think we're a lot like Alphaeus: we all have roles to play in a story that is much larger than ourselves. But our role is brief, and the story we're in isn't really about us. Yet we don't seem to realize that. We're like extras in a film who deceive ourselves into thinking that we're the lead actors.

The story we're in is the story of reality. It's a great, big story. God plays the starring role in that eternal story. Our roles in that story matter, but we're not the stars. Part of our problem is that we don't want to accept that reality. We tend to think the story is all about us. But it isn't. It's about God.

In order to see this, we need to recover an understanding of who God is. We need to see how big he is, what he's like. And only then can we understand the significance of our lives.

This month, we're going to look at some passages from the book of Isaiah, found in the Old Testament. Some of the passages of this book are quoted during Christmas time, because they speak about a son being born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14; 9:6-7). But there's a lot more to Isaiah than predictions about a coming King, as we'll see.

Before we start looking at this book, I want to give us a bit of context. Isaiah was a prophet in Judah in the eighth century BC (from about 739-700 BC and perhaps beyond). Prophets are sometimes seen as foretellers, but they were really messengers. Most of their message directly applied to their own time, though often they did report on what would happen in the future. Isaiah delivered messages from God to the people of Judah during a tumultuous time. The year he started his ministry was the year one king died. He would continue to deliver messages during the reigns of the next three kings or four kings. During this time, Judah was threatened by the northern kingdom of Israel, which had joined forces with Syria to wage war against it. Later, Judah was threatened by the nation of Assyria, which became the superpower of the world and conquered Israel. One scholar says, "Like no other prophet of the OT [Old

Testament] his oracles were immersed in the turbulent events of his own time.”¹ Also during this time in the history of Judah, the people continually turned away from God and worshiped false gods, idols. What the people needed wasn’t military power or political security. They didn’t need a better economy. What they needed was to be reminded of who God was.

We live in turbulent times, too. And we may think we need different leaders, laws to be changed, better technology, and many other things. Those are all important. But we need what the people of Judah needed long ago. We also need to know who God is.

Today, we’re going to learn about who God is and why he made us. We’ll look at a few different parts of Isaiah. But we’ll spend most of our time in chapter 40. I invite you to turn there now.

Here is Isaiah 40:12–31:

- 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.
- 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;

¹ Mark F. Rooker, “The Book of Isaiah,” in Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti, *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 367.

he seeks out a skillful craftsman
 to set up an idol that will not move.

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.

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.

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.²

² All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

The basic idea that Isaiah presents of God is that there is simply no one like him. He is the Creator of the universe. Everything else that exists is created. God knows no beginning and he has no end. No one can teach God, because he already knows everything. He didn't consult anyone else when he fashioned his plans for the universe. He didn't get his idea of justice from us; in fact, his character is the measure of justice and goodness.

God is infinite. Compared to him, we are just dust. Compared to him, all the nations of the earth are like drops in a bucket. Lebanon was known for its great trees; if all those trees were burned, the energy produced would be no match for the amount of power that God has. After all, God made the entire universe out of nothing, simply by commanding it to be.

“To whom will you liken God?” (v. 18). No one. We can't properly compare God to anything in creation. We tend to think of him as a grandfather, or a clockmaker, or perhaps a loving father or a controlling dictator, depending on our beliefs about God. He is not an idol, an unthinking, impersonal object. He's not the Force of the Stars Wars movies, some impersonal energy that binds all things together. Some people talk of “the Universe” a kind of God-substitute. But God isn't the universe. He is the universe's creator. The universe doesn't have a mind or a will; it's not personal. But God has those things. He thinks, he wills, he has emotions, and he does hold everything together.

In Isaiah, we see language about God stretching “out the heavens like a curtain, and spread[ing] them like a tent to dwell in.” This language recalls the tabernacle, a portable temple that God commanded Israel to build. God was said to dwell in that tent, among the Israelites. It was regarded as the most holy place on Earth. This language is important here because it means that God created the whole universe to be a holy place, a place where he dwells among his people, a cosmic temple, a theater for his glory, to display his excellence.

We're told he “sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.” We have to keep in mind that we're reading poetry here. Most of the language of the prophets of the Old Testament is poetry. Poetry uses language in different ways, creating images that are memorable. God doesn't literally sit above the Earth because God doesn't have a body. He's immaterial. We can say that he's nowhere, because you can't find him in one place in the universe. But, more importantly, we can say he's everywhere, because his power extends to all the universe and because he knows everything that happens. So, this language is a symbolic. It demonstrates that God is higher than we are. Compared to him, we're little grasshoppers.

Compared to God, all the kings and queens, the princes and princesses, the presidents and prime ministers are nothing. Elsewhere in the Bible, we're told that God makes nations and kings to rise and fall (Job 12:23; Dan. 2:21). He can change the hearts of rulers (Prov. 21:1). Isaiah says that God can do this so easily that it's like blowing away stubble.

God says, "To whom then will you compare me?" He invites us to look up and see the "host," which refers to the heavenly bodies. Look at the stars, he says. Can you count them? God created all the stars, fashioning each one. He knows them by name, which is to say he's familiar with them all. Do you know how many stars there are in the universe? We don't know the exact number, but one estimate is that there are one sextillion stars. That's a "1" followed by twenty-one zeros. Or, to put it differently, that's one billion times one trillion stars. Just one galaxy, ours, the Milky Way, has 100 billion stars in it. There are approximately 10 billion galaxies in the universe. Assuming that there are equal amounts of stars in each galaxy, we get that one sextillion number.³ But the fact is that we really don't know how many stars there are in the universe. But God knows, because he created each one. And if God knows all the stars in the universe, he certainly knows all the people on Earth. We are more important to him than stars! Therefore, the people of Israel could not say that they were hidden from God. God may seem hidden to us, but we are certainly not hidden to him. He knows everything about us: what we've done, what we've thought and desired, what we need, what will happen to us in the future—everything.

And all of this is meant as an encouragement to us. Though things may seem out of control in our lives, they are not. God is there for his people. And God is not limited, though we are. God's energy and strength are endless. He doesn't sleep. He doesn't get tired. There is nothing too hard for him to do. God will sustain everyone who trusts in him. Those who wait for God will be renewed in their strength. That doesn't mean that God's people will be physically strong, or that they will never face challenges. The lives of Christians are not different in some ways from the lives of others. We all get sick and die. We all struggle with ups and downs. But those people who truly know God will survive all of that. God will sustain them. Even death itself can't harm those who know God.

I've moved through the contents of most of chapter 40 quickly because I want us to have a quick overview of who God is. In short, there is no one like him.

³ <https://scienceline.ucsb.edu/getkey.php?key=3775>.

But I want us to see some other passages in Isaiah. We'll go through them in the order they appear in this book, so you can follow along. I'll read each passage and make a quick comment about each.

Turn to Isaiah 42:5:

Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people on it
and spirit to those who walk in it:

God is the Creator of everything, of all people. Again, we have that language of him stretching out the heavens like the fabric that covered the tabernacle was stretched out. God made the universe to be his holy place, where he is worshiped and known by human beings.

Look three verses later at Isaiah 42:8:

⁸ I am the LORD; that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to carved idols.

God will not share his glory with any false god, any idol. That means we should only worship the one true God. We'll talk about what the great problem of humanity is next week, but I want us to see now that only God should be worshiped. When we make anything or anyone else the center of our lives, the most important thing to us, the thing that we love the most, daydream about, want the most, the thing that we trust to make us happy, secure, safe, and whole, then we're worshipping that thing.

Turn two chapters to Isaiah 44:6–7:

⁶ Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
“I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.
⁷ Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.
Let him declare and set it before me,
since I appointed an ancient people.
Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.

The God of the Bible, the God who is king of Israel, is the only true God. There is no other god beside him. Unlike false gods, the true God knows what will happen in the future (see also Isa. 46:10).

Then look at Isaiah 45:5–7:

- ⁵ I am the LORD, and there is no other,
besides me there is no God;
I equip you, though you do not know me,
⁶ that people may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is none besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other.
⁷ I form light and create darkness;
I make well-being and create calamity;
I am the LORD, who does all these things.

Here, we have much the same message. There is only one God, who gives us life and breath and everything. He is in control of everything. Yet there is a hint of what’s wrong with us: “I equip you, though you do not know me.”

Look several verses later, at Isaiah 45:18:

- ¹⁸ For thus says the LORD,
who created the heavens
(he is God!),
who formed the earth and made it
(he established it;
he did not create it empty,
he formed it to be inhabited!):
“I am the LORD, and there is no other.

Again, God created everything. He didn’t create the world to be empty. He created it to be filled with people who know him.

There are many other passages from this one book of the Bible that I could quote, but they all tell the same basic message: The one true God is incomparably great, and he made the vast stretches of the universe to display his greatness. He made us, human beings, to know him and love him. If we know him and love him, we will do what he has told us to do. We will live for him.

This is good news because it means that there is a wonderful being who governs the whole universe. There is a good, all-powerful, all-knowing God who is in charge. The God who is love (1 John 4:8, 16) is in control. And he made us to know him, which means our lives have a purpose. Our lives have meaning. Our lives have value. That’s all good news.

But there is bad news. I’ll talk more about this next week, but I’ll say just a little bit right now. The bad news is that we turn away from the true God and run to false gods. Now, people

who aren't Christians wouldn't say they're worshiping a false god. If they're religious people, they would probably say that they worship the true God. But there is only one true God, and he has revealed himself through various prophets, from Moses to Isaiah to Jesus. He has revealed himself through Jesus' messengers, the apostles, people like Peter and Paul and John. The God of the Bible is the one true God, and we start out this life not knowing him. Instead of worshiping him, we run to false gods.

People who aren't religious would think that's all nonsense. They don't think about any god. They don't think they're people who worship. But stop and think about this: What is the most important thing in your life? What is the one thing that, if you lost it, would make your life not worth living? For some people, that's a relationship. For others, it's money or possessions. For some, it's a career or a good reputation. And for others, that's entertainment and pleasure. We all have something that is most important to us.

So, though there is one true God who made us for himself, we don't know him, and we make some created thing our functional god, the true object of our worship. That's bad news.

But the good news of Christianity, and the good news of Christmas, is that God has given us a way to come back to him. That way is Jesus. In short, he comes to fulfill God's plans for humanity. He does what we should do but do not. He lives a perfect human life, centered on God. Though Jesus is God—he's the Son of God, who always existed—he became a human being, and while on Earth, he always loved, honored, obeyed, and worshiped God the Father. Part of the message of Christianity is that God is so incomparably great that he is both one God and three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He's a God who is perfectly unified and diversified. He is a God who is inherently relational and inherently loving. And because he loves his people so much, he sent the Son to rescue us. At Christmas, we remember the great miracle: the Son of God became a human being (without ceasing to be God).

Not only did Jesus live the perfect life, but he paid the penalty for our sin. We've already sung about this, and we'll remember his sacrifice when we take the Lord's Supper. The logic of the Bible is that our sin, our rebellion against God, our failure to know him, love him, worship him, and obey him, deserves death. Jesus came to pay the death penalty so that we could go free.

But the only way that we can return to God, to be free from our sin and guilt, to escape the judgment that we deserve, is to trust in Jesus. We need to know him, love him, and follow him. There is no other way to be in a right relationship with God.

There are other passages in the book of Isaiah that deal with what Jesus came to do, and we'll read those over the coming weeks. But here's an interesting one. It's Isaiah 43:4-7:

- ⁴ Because you are precious in my eyes,
and honored, and I love you,
I give men in return for you,
peoples in exchange for your life.
- ⁵ Fear not, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you.
- ⁶ I will say to the north, Give up,
and to the south, Do not withhold;
bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the end of the earth,
- ⁷ everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."

God loves his people. He made them for his glory. And because he loves them, he ransomed them. In Isaiah's day, God promised to bring the people of Israel back to their own land after they were exiled. He would ransom them by defeating their enemies. But the true ransom came through just one man, who was given in exchange for us. And that one man is no mere man. He is the God-man, Jesus. He was given for us so that we could come back home.

If you do not know Jesus, I urge to learn more about this incomparably great God. There's the whole Bible to explore, and we want to help you know the Bible. If you don't have a study Bible, we'll give you one. Our website is a great resource. You can find hundreds of sermons that explain passages of the Bible. There are also links to Bible reading plans, websites and apps where you can read the Bible, and some resources that can help you understand the Bible better. If you want someone to guide you in your learning more about Jesus, I would love to sit down with you and do that personally. The important thing is to begin now. God has revealed himself. He wants to be known. Do you want to know him?

If you do know him, if you're a Christian, remember who this great God is. Trust that he is still great when life doesn't turn out the way you imagined it would. Trust him through difficulties. He is a good, all-powerful God, and he is in control. He has made us to worship him through good times and bad. When all the world seems strange, as if everyone's going crazy, and when all the world seems dark, remember that there is a God who is infinitely wise, a God who is light, and he will renew your strength even if you feel weary. Continue to trust in him.