

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
September 18, 2016

Lesson Text: Isaiah 40:21-31
Lesson Title: The Foundations of the Earth

Introduction

The greatness of the book of Isaiah is nowhere more apparent than in Isaiah 40. It is a chapter of great comfort and assurance for the people of God (Isaiah 40:1-11). The chapter introduces a section of Isaiah's prophesy during a period before the Babylonian exile was ended. To the exiles these words provided comfort and hope that God would soon intervene in history and they could return home.

As encouraging as Isaiah 40 is, it is more than a call for God's people to have comfort and hope. The prophet builds his case for that comfort and hope by assuring the discouraged exiles they may still cling to God and His Word (Isaiah 40:1-8). Isaiah built his case by magnifying the infinite power and wisdom of God in verses 9-11. He continues in verses 12-17, as he presents a series of thought-provoking questions and word pictures of the greatness of God, the splendor of which would be impossible to match. Verses 18-20 compares the living God to the helpless man-made idols. Idols were common in Babylon which may have tempted some Jewish exiles to question the ability of Jehovah God to deliver them from captivity.

Like the Jewish exiles in Babylon, we are in an idolatrous culture where any god is viewed as equal to Jehovah God. Isaiah says, "*To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him?*" (Isaiah 40:18). There is no god like Him. The Hebrew word for "*likeness*" is *demuth*, {dem-ooth}. It means "an original after which the likeness is formed." This word is never used of anyone but God. Let there be no mistake, "*There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*" (1 Timothy 2:5).

Without specifically stating the helplessness of the idols and god's men make, Isaiah turns his eyes and thoughts toward the creative power of God. The prophet's description of God is filled with assurance and hope.

The Sovereign Power of the Creator (Isaiah 40:21-26)

Verse 21

"Have ye not known? have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth?"

In a sequence of four questions, Isaiah seems to argue with his readers in order to make an impact. Everyone listening to Isaiah should have “known...heard” and clearly “understood from the foundations of the earth,” that God is the Creator of everything. The truth “from the beginning” of God’s creative power ought to convince anyone of the power and ability of God compared to the weakness and impotence of man-made gods.

Note: What we know to be true about God does not always make an impact on us. Isaiah’s words are designed to make an impact!

Verse 22-23

“It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain, and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in: That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity.”

Isaiah describes our Creator God as “he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth.” The Hebrew word “circle” translated here is not the word for a perfect circle. It is the word for “slightly off-centered.” If you have ever viewed a picture of the earth from outer space, it will appear slightly off-centered. Also, keep in mind Isaiah wrote these words in an age when men thought the earth was flat, not in a circle. Of course we know the earth is not flat, but round. Isaiah was right!

Do you believe the Bible is inspired of God? Do you believe God knew the earth was a “circle” long before man knew it was a “circle?” If you do, why do you have such a difficult time trusting God?

“The inhabitants therefore are as grasshoppers” means humanity appears like grasshoppers as God looks down from His heavenly throne. This reveals the smallness and minuteness of man compared to the sovereign God. Man, like “grasshoppers” are no match for God. The “heavens,” or skies, are pictured as “spread out like curtains of a tent” for God to “dwell in” (Psalm 104:2). As easy as a camper pitches his tent, God “stretched out the heavens.”

“That bringeth the princes to nothing; he maketh the judges of the earth as vanity” speaks of God’s sovereign control over earths most powerful rulers. God raises up and disposes earthly rulers and leaders according to His will (Isaiah 34:12; Job 12:17-21; Daniel 2:21).

Verse 24

“Yea, they shall not be planted; yea, they shall not be sown: yea, their stock shall not take root in the earth: and he shall also blow upon them, and they shall wither, and the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble.”

This verse expands on verse 23 by telling us how God removes earthly leaders. According to the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which was ratified in 1951, no President of the United States may serve more than two terms plus a maximum of two years having acceded as President under some other President’s term (or more than one term following more than two years having acceded under some other President’s term). All those words sound official and are backed by the authority of the Constitution of the United States. However, long before there was a United States of America or a constitution, Isaiah said the rulers of this world are raised up by God and removed from office by God. It is not a constitution that determines our President, it is God. He raises them up and He sets them down.

“They shall not be planted; yea, they shall not be sown: yea, their stock shall not take root in the earth” means earthly leaders and rulers will not be around long enough to take root in the earth! The Lord will “blow upon them, and they shall wither, and the whirlwind shall take them away as stubble.” When the Lord “blows upon them” they will dry up like dry grass and the wind will carry them away to be remembered no more.

Illus. Have you ever picked a dandelion in the grass and blown the little seeds all over the yard? That is what God does with world rulers.

Verse 25-26

“To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth.”

These verses repeat an earlier thought in verse 18, “*To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him?*” No one can be made equal to Jehovah God. The “Holy One” asks, “To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal?” God’s holiness means He is in a category all His own. We need Someone who is not like us. Only a holy God can save us. Only a holy God can sustain us. Only a holy God can satisfy us.

“Lift up your eyes on high” is an appeal to anyone who has eyes to look up and see. View how the created universe gives witness of God’s creative power and glory (Psalm 19:1). Speaking of the stars the prophet tells us God brings “out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth.” God knows all the “hosts” or stars by name. Do you believe that? The stars are numbered and they are

named. All creation knows God formed them. God's ability to number and name the stars is according to "the greatness of his might" and His "strength in power." God is so magnificent and powerful that "not one" of the stars "faileth." That means "not one" is missing. Not one star runs away from God. Every star is seen and known by God.

The Sustaining Power of the Creator (Isaiah 40:27-31)

Verse 27

"Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God?"

The Jewish exiles had been taken out of Judah and sent to Babylon for seventy years. At the time of Isaiah's writing the people were weary of the lordship of the Babylonians and the disciplinary hand of God.

Verse 27 indicates the people thought God had lost track of them. They thought He had forgotten where they were and their needs. God asks, "Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the LORD, and my judgment is passed over from my God?" Nothing seemed to be changing. Nothing seemed to be happening. The logical conclusion was God did not care and everything was over.

What questions are you asking today? Are you weary of where you are and what you are going through? Has the lordship of this culture and spiritual climate caused you to conclude your "way is hid from the Lord?" Do you feel as if God has forgotten or is overlooking you? If so, listen carefully to the Lord's answer in verses 28-31.

Verse 28

"Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding."

The answer came to Israel in an unforgettable assurance through several key questions. We have seen these questions before in verse 21. He was asking the exiles: "Are you not aware? Have you forgotten? Are you not listening with your ears?" "The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding." There are several descriptions about God in this verse which show how He is able to help us. First, God never "faints." God is not passed out somewhere, unaware of the surroundings around Him. The idea is not to shame us because we pass out sometimes. The idea is to teach us we can depend upon God. Second, God is not "weary." God does not get tired of my asking and praying.

God does not get tired of my complaints. He was patient with Israel over and over again. The God who “is not weary” is our God. He cares about us and what we are going through. Third, God’s “understanding” is unsearchable. Simply stated, that means you cannot plumb the depths of His wisdom. God is infinitely wise. You may be at the end of your rope but rest assured God is not! When you see His plan work out, it will all make sense!

Verse 29

“He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.”

“He giveth” means God wants to get involved in our weakness. God is always willing and ready to “give.” He is a giving God! In this case, God “giveth power to the faint.” The word “faint” refers to the “tired” and the “exhausted.” The exiles were tired, fatigued, and exhausted. The emotional and spiritual drain of captivity had taken its toll. They had lost sight of the goal. They had no energy to move on. Worry and weariness go hand in hand. One feeds the other. There is no way to get out of it on your own. Thank God we have a “giving God.”

God gives “power to the faint.” That is what the “faint” need. “Power” means “vigor, might, substance.” God also “increaseth strength.” That means the “strength” God gives is not a one-time shot in the arm but a continual giving of “strength.”

Israel’s very sense of helplessness and weariness gave God an opportunity to provide “power” and “strength.” Are you giving God an opportunity to give His “power” and “strength” to you?

Verse 30-31

“Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”

“Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall” speaks of the reality of our needs. “Youths” and “young men” refer to the select, most energetic, most athletic among us. The Lord wants us to know people in their prime of life, in their peak strength, can grow weary and “utterly fall.” “Utterly fall” means “be totally exhausted.”

The exile must have been difficult and exhausting for the even the strongest among God’s people. Yet “they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.”

To “wait upon the LORD” means “to collect, or to anticipate.” It is “to stand in anticipation.” Waiting upon the Lord supplies strength. “Renew” can be translated “change, slide by, sprout with new life, or enter some new element into a situation.” It is a word indicating God is coming in contact with me in my weariness and weakness to exchange everything He is with everything I am not!

Most of us do not like to “wait.” Waiting is a part of life. In fact, a woman who is expecting a baby waits nine months (if she goes full term) for the birth of her baby. Waiting does not diminish her. The waiting literally enlarges her! The waiting brings forth life. That is exactly how it is in our relationship with the Lord. Waiting does not diminish our relationship with God. It enlarges our capacity for God in us and for others to see God in us. It results in life.

Once the strength of the Lord has come to the weary and waiting soul, we “shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” Waiting and renewing results in soaring. The illustration of the “eagle” is so very powerful. Many commentators suggest Isaiah is talking about the molting process when he speaks about “mounting up with wings as eagles.” As the eagle approaches the molting period for his old feathers to be shed, he loses speed and strength which affects his ability to fly. The old feathers begin to wear out. They lose their sleek and shiny appearance. Then the molting process takes place and brand new feathers grow on the eagle. When the new feathers emerge, the eagle has renewed strength and the ability to once again soar.

The exiles would know exactly what Isaiah was saying when he said, “mount up with wings as eagles.” This would give them hope that they would one-day soar high again and fulfill their God-given purpose as a nation and a people.

When we exchange our weakness for His strength, we can “run and not be weary.” Finally, we shall “walk and not faint.” The “runner” represents endurance in life. The “walker” represents progress for the daily encounter in life. Whether we are walking, running, or flying, God can pour strength and power into us for whatever we need.

Conclusion

The words we have just studied were prophesied by Isaiah to the Jews exiled in Babylon. By the time of his writing they had been in captivity for several decades. The exiles felt abandoned and all alone. Maybe they were asking, “Where is God when you need Him?” The prophet’s words of comfort and encouragement were desperately needed and answered their questions.

Doctor A.W. Tozer once said, “What you believe about God determines what you believe about everything else.” No truer words have ever been spoken.

Isaiah wanted to remind the exiles God was the Creator of everything and the Sustainer of everything. God knows the number and names of every star. He knows you and where you are. God gives power to the faint.

Amen.