

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

ISA. 40:12 Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance?

13 Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or *being* his counsellor hath taught him?

14 With whom took he counsel, and *who* instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and

taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding?

15 Behold, the nations *are* as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing.

16 And Lebanon *is* not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering.

17 All nations before him *are* as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.

NOTES

Who Is like God?

Lesson Text: Isaiah 40:12-17

Related Scriptures: Psalm 33:8-17; Isaiah 41:21-29;
Jeremiah 10:1-25; Daniel 4:28-37; Revelation 15:2-4

TIME: about 700-695 B.C.

PLACE: Jerusalem

GOLDEN TEXT—"All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity" (Isaiah 40:17).

Lesson Exposition

QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS— Isa. 40:12-14

The passage's opening questions assume a cosmic focus. Only Yahweh, the God of Israel, enjoys dominion; no one can access His will or knowledge.

The first set (Isa. 40:12). By offering contrasting elements of the Creation, the prophet effectively considered the universe's totality. Recalling Genesis 1, Isaiah progressed from water (Gen. 1:2-6) to the sky (vss. 7-8) to the earth (vs. 9). All creation is under God's dominion.

Isaiah painted a contrast with the creation myths of the surrounding culture. Many in captivity believed that conquest reflected the superiority of the victor's gods over the gods of the defeated. Isaiah, however, left no room for that.

Those seasoned by exile knew Babylon's myths. In its creation myth, Marduk proclaimed that he "measured the shape of Apsu," the freshwater deity.

Recalling the Babylonian text, Isaiah asked who measured the waters in his hand. Only Yahweh. Isaiah's Babylonian-style question delivered a theological punch. Marduk is nothing. No one is comparable to God.

Continuing, the prophet asked who

had meted, or measured, the sky. Once again, the exiles would understand. "Meted" is more than the assessment of dimensions. It denotes directing and ordering. The Babylonian Empire was fascinated by the night sky for that reason. They believed it revealed destinies. Isaiah, however, articulated a different view: Humanity is not subject to the sky's destiny. The sky is subject to God. He alone directs the future.

Verse 12 also introduces a second dimension of creation theology. God is the architect of the universe. In Job 38, God described how He created all things. As an architect designs structures on the blueprint, God created the cosmos.

Likewise, Proverbs 8:22-31 details Wisdom's experience of the Creation. She was a spectator to God's craftsmanship, watching Him construct the cosmos. Accordingly, wisdom and purpose motivated God's creative act.

The second set (Isa. 40:13). Verse 13 asks who has "directed" God's Spirit. No one is above God's Spirit. This is the same verb used in verse 12, which asks who "meted out" the sky.

In verse 13, Isaiah completed his refutation of Babylonian astrology. While

the supposed source of fates follows God's directions, no one directs God's Spirit. He is free from outside manipulation. His Spirit is self-directing.

The third set (Isa. 40:14). The prophet asked from whom God seeks counsel. No one advises Him (vs. 13), and He seeks no one's advice (vs. 14). The supposed counselors of deities have neither knowledge nor understanding. They stumble in the darkness (Ps. 82:5). No one knows the cosmos like its Creator. No one directs or informs the mind of God.

STATEMENTS WITHOUT RESPONSES—Isa. 40:15-17

Isaiah next turned to the political landscape. He began and ended with general statements and narrowed in on a location in between. Isaiah's discussion of Lebanon serves as a model that we can apply to any nation.

The first set (Isa. 40:15). Isaiah assessed the gravity of the nations. Undoubtedly, a people retreating from years of Babylonian exile felt they had a sufficient grasp of the nations' weight.

Yet, seemingly immense things are minute to God. The nations are like specks of dust to God. Similarly, the isles are fine dust.

God's people experienced several waves of imposing might. Already, Israel had suffered enslavement in Egypt, periods of Canaanite submission, Assyrian deportation, and Babylonian exile. Before the returning Jews stood a coming span of imperial submission. Babylon gave way to Persia. Persia gave way to Greece. Greece gave way to Rome. Yet the nations are frivolous to God.

The second set (Isa. 40:16). The prophet then turned to Lebanon. He used the famed region to construct a powerful argument. If even great Lebanon is insufficient, how much less so are the other regions?

Lebanon had a proliferation of timber and wildlife. Yet its surplus could not supply enough wood or animals for sacrificial fires. No animal sacrifice is sufficient. Instead, we are to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving (Ps. 50:14), praising the Architect of the cosmos.

The third set (Isa. 40:17). Concluding the section, Isaiah stated the nations are less than nothing. They have descended from order to chaos.

The nations' final descriptor, "vanity," also means chaotic formlessness. That first appears in Genesis 1:2, describing the pre-ordered state. Before God spoke, the universe was chaotic. The nations appear so before God. The universe and all that inhabit it pale in comparison to the Creator.

—Andrew Rudolf

QUESTIONS

1. How does Isaiah imitate Genesis 1?
2. Why did Isaiah use language from a familiar Babylonian prayer?
3. How does the prophet express a view of the night sky different from Babylon's?
4. According to Proverbs 8, who watched God create the cosmos?
5. What does the word choice in Isaiah 40:13 suggest about God's Spirit?
6. How is Isaiah's mention of Lebanon applicable today?
7. How does Israel's history magnify God's might over the nations?
8. Which resources of Lebanon fall short before God?
9. What sacrifices does God ask of us?
10. What does the word "vanity" recall in verse 17?

—Andrew Rudolf

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. In the face of challenges, we should remember that God holds the world in His hand (Isa. 40:12).
2. We can never try to manipulate God. Instead, we should rest in the comfort that what God has planned will come to pass (vs. 13).
3. God is the source of wisdom. We should seek His guidance in all that we do (vs. 14).
4. When we are burdened by politics, we can rest assured that God is greater than the nations (vs. 15).
5. God is far greater than anything the world can offer (vs. 16).
6. No obstacle can ever stand in God's way. He counts even the nations as nothing (vs. 17).

—Andrew Rudolf

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. If even the cosmos is minute to God (Isa. 40:12), how can God be personal with us (cf. John 1:14)?
2. Isaiah stated that no one can understand God's mind or plan (Isa. 40:13). How, then, can Christians know God's will in their lives? How has God revealed Himself to us?
3. All the animals of Lebanon were insufficient for sacrifice (Isa. 40:16). What implications does this have for sacrifice (cf. Hos. 6:6)? What does this say about the gravity of Christ's sacrifice (cf. Heb. 10)?
4. If God counts the nations as nothing (Isa. 40:15, 17), does He care about the political affairs of the world? How should Christians approach governments and their nations (cf. Rom. 13:1-7)?

—Andrew Rudolf

Golden Text *Illuminated*

"All nations before Him are as nothing; and they are counted to Him less than nothing, and vanity" (Isaiah 40:17).

After decades of Israelite unfaithfulness and idolatry, Isaiah declared doom and destruction for Judah. Sure enough, around 120 years later, Babylon exiled the people.

But that was not the end of Judah. God had promised them a prominent role in the world as His blessing to the nations (cf. Gen. 12:3). But how could they go from captivity to restoration? The answer: the matchless supremacy of an incomparable God. That is the point of Isaiah 40.

1. The chaos and rage of the nations pose no challenge to God's supremacy. God's declaration that the nations are as "nothing" does not mean He hates the world. Although they rebel and seek to thwart His plan, they change nothing about His fundamental nature as God. At the end of the day, the nations could be here or *not* be here, and it would change nothing about God's perfections.

2. The chaos and rage of the nations pose no challenge to God's plan. While the rage of the nations might create a feeling of insecurity in *our* hearts, the Holy One has no such response (cf. Ps. 2:1-12). The greatest proof that God will fulfill His plan is God Himself. The supremacy of God is our certainty for the future!

Therefore, as God's people, we pray for the nations, and we preach to the nations, knowing that because God is who He is, our praying and preaching are not in vain.

—Jerod A. Gilcher

Daily Bible Readings for Home Study and Worship

(Readings are for the week previous to the lesson topics.)

1. September 7. In the Beginning

M—God Made Everything. Ps. 8:1-9.
T—God Controls Creation. Job 38:12-21.
W—Clothed in Majesty. Ps. 104:1-9.
T—The Source of All Life. Ps. 104:24-30.
F—New Creation Coming. Isa. 42:5-9.
S—New Creation in Christ. 2 Cor. 4:1-7.
S—Creation of Heaven and Earth.
Gen. 1:1-13.

2. September 14. Before All Things

M—God's Firstborn. Ps. 89:19-29.
T—God's Dwelling Place. 1 Kgs. 8:12-19, 27.
W—A Better Dwelling Place. Hag. 1:7-8; 2:1-9.
T—God Dwelt among Us. John 1:14-18.
F—King of All Things. Heb. 2:5-10.
S—God Dwells in His Church. Eph. 2:11-22.
S—The Purpose of All Creation. Col. 1:15-23.

3. September 21. In Heaven and Earth

M—Foretelling Israel's Fall. Deut. 31:24-29.
T—False Hope. Jer. 23:9-15.
W—False Prophets. Ezek. 13:1-9.
T—False Peace. Ezek. 13:10-16.
F—Hope for a Sinful People. Isa. 57:15-21.
S—The Nearness of God. Acts 17:24-31.
S—God Fills Heaven and Earth.
Jer. 23:18-24.

4. September 28. Nothing Is Hidden from God

M—Kept by God. Ps. 121:1-8.
T—Overwhelmed by God's Presence.
Job 42:1-6.
W—Exposed to God's Sight. Heb. 4:11-16.
T—God's Watchfulness. Ps. 33:13-22.
F—God Knows Our Needs. Matt. 6:5-8.
S—Praising God's Wisdom. Rom. 11:33-36.
S—God Is Everywhere. Ps. 139:1-16.

5. October 5. God Warns Pharaoh through Dreams

M—The Source of All Knowledge.
Dan. 2:17-24.
T—Revealer of Mysteries. Dan. 2:25-30.
W—The Providence of God. Gen. 50:15-21.
T—Interpreting Two Dreams. Gen. 40:1-15.
F—Joseph Forgotten. Gen. 40:16-23.
S—Pharaoh's Dream. Gen. 41:14-24.
S—God's Purpose Unfolds. Gen. 41:25-36.

6. October 12. God Sees Our Hearts

M—Caring for the Poor. Deut. 15:1-11.
T—Judgment on Presumption. Lev. 10:1-11.
W—Judgment on Greed. Josh. 7:10-26.
T—Judgment on Irreverence. 1 Chr. 13:5-12;
15:11-13.
F—Judgment and Deliverance. Ps. 34:11-22.
S—Principles for Giving. 2 Cor. 8:1-15.
S—Fear the Lord. Acts 4:32-5:11.

7. October 19. God Sees Nathanael

M—Jesus Knows All People. John 2:23-25.
T—Jesus Is the Son of God. Matt. 16:13-20.
W—Heaven Opened to Jacob. Gen. 28:10-17.
T—Heaven Opened to Jesus.
Matt. 3:13-17.

F—The Glory of the Son of Man.
Luke 9:26-36.
S—Finding the Messiah. John 1:35-42.
S—Son of God and Son of Man. John 1:43-51.

8. October 26. God Sees the Samaritan Woman

M—Water for Israel. Ex. 17:1-7.
T—Sustained in the Wilderness. Neh. 9:15-21.
W—Wells of Salvation. Isa. 12:1-6.
T—The Fountain of Living Water. Jer. 2:9-13.
F—Jesus Gives the Holy Spirit. John 7:37-39.
S—Comforted by God's Knowledge. Ps. 56:8-11.
S—Jesus Gives Living Water. John 4:5-19, 28-29.

9. November 2. Power to Impart Wisdom

M—Wisdom before Creation. Prov. 8:12, 22-31.
T—Unexpected Deliverance. Isa. 63:15-64:4.
W—What the Spirit Reveals. Eph. 1:15-21.
T—Born of the Spirit. John 3:1-8.
F—We Have the Truth. 1 John 2:18-27.
S—Christ Is Our Wisdom. 1 Cor. 1:18-31.
S—The Spirit Gives Us Wisdom. 1 Cor. 2:6-16.

10. November 9. Parting the Red Sea

M—God's Steadfast Love. Ps. 136:1-16.
T—Lord of Heaven and Earth. Josh. 2:8-11.
W—No Other Savior. Isa. 43:1-13.
T—Making a Way. Isa. 43:16-21.
F—Delivered through Water. Ps. 18:13-19.
S—Wait for God's Salvation. Ex. 5:15-6:1.
S—God's Power to Save. Ex. 14:10-22.

11. November 16. Jesus Calms a Storm

M—God Is Sovereign over Creation.
Ps. 135:1-7.
T—God Calms the Sea. Jonah 1:4-16.
W—God Stills a Storm. Ps. 107:23-32.
T—Paul in a Storm. Acts 27:13-26.
F—God Preserves Paul. Acts 27:27-44.
S—We Will Not Fear. Ps. 46:1-11.
S—The Power of Jesus' Words. Mark 4:35-41.

12. November 23. Jesus Casts Out Legion

M—Jesus' Authority over Demons.
Mark 1:21-28.
T—Demons Recognize Jesus. Mark 3:7-12.
W—Binding Satan. Mark 3:22-27.
T—Defeating Satan. Rev. 20:1-10.
F—A Sinner's Reaction to Jesus.
Luke 5:1-11.
S—Declaring What God Has Done.
Ps. 145:4-12.
S—Freeing a Captive from Satan.
Mark 5:1-20.

13. November 30. Who Is like God?

M—Tremble before the Messiah. Ps. 2:1-12.
T—God's Mighty Works. Ps. 89:5-18.
W—The Song of Moses. Ex. 15:1-18.
T—The Futility of Idols. Jer. 10:1-10.
F—God Governs the Earth. Jer. 10:11-25.
S—All Nations Will Worship God. Rev. 15:2-4.
S—The Greatness of God. Isa. 40:12-17.