

Isaiah 40:12- 31

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 November 2017

Preacher: David MacPherson

- [0 : 00] Have you got issues with God? I wonder what the right answer to that question is.
- Well, the right answer is the honest one. And if you do have issues with God, be assured that you're not alone.
- Many people have issues with God. Many of God's people have issues with God. I wonder what your issues might be.
- Does God confuse you? Does he anger you? Does he disappoint you? Now, these are things you might not readily, verbally declare.
- But in the depth of your soul, in the reality of your life, these are the kind of issues that perhaps rise to the surface.
- [1 : 05] The people of Israel, God's people, in Isaiah's day had issues with God. They had some big issues with God.
- And we can identify their issues by listening to what they were saying about God. There in verse 27, we have Isaiah, God through Isaiah, asking a question of the people.
- And the question reveals what they were saying, what they were declaring, what issues they had with God. Let's read that verse. Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel?
- My way is hidden from the Lord. My cause is disregarded by my God. This is what the people were saying. My way is hidden from the Lord.
- My cause is disregarded by my God. They believed in God, but they had issues with God.
- [2 : 13] Now, I've already counseled honesty in this matter as a good thing. But in the case of Israel, what we find is not simply an honest description of their felt experience, but an accusation or a complaint directed at God.
- Note the language of Isaiah there in verse 27. Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel? What were the issues? What were the accusations?
- What were the complaints? Well, I think we can summarize them in this way. We can identify three key issues that the people had with God. First of all, their claim was this.
- God doesn't know. God doesn't know what's going on in our lives. What do they say? My way is hidden from the Lord. He doesn't know.
- He doesn't know what's going on. That's their first issue. Their second issue is that God doesn't care. He doesn't care about what's going on. So even if he does know, he doesn't care.
- [3 : 18] That's what they say. My cause is disregarded by my God. Now, that language isn't of lack of knowledge. They're saying, well, maybe you do know, but you don't care.
- You put it to one side. You disregard my circumstances and my pain and my suffering. God doesn't know. God doesn't care.

But I think there's a third issue, not so explicitly stated, but I think we can legitimately draw out a third issue that the people have with God. And it can be summarized in these words. God isn't able.

He isn't able to help. So even if he does know, and even if he does care, which we're not persuaded that he does, but even if he does, he's not able to help.

That seems to be implicit in the complaint leveled against God. Now, what is God's response through the prophet to the issues raised or the complaints leveled against his person?

[4 : 18] Well, I think we can summarize his response in three words. Three words that we find in verse 26. Lift your eyes. Lift your eyes.

That's what God says to this complaining people, to this people who have issues with him. Lift your eyes. Or to put it another way, God is saying, look at me. Look at me.

This is what Israel had to do. And this is what we are being called to do. This is what you are being called to do, even this morning. Lift up your eyes and look.

You know, we can get into all kinds of trouble for not looking carefully and in the right direction. I'm sure some of you will have seen, you know, video clips online of folks engrossed in their smartphones.

It's almost humorous. They're walking along the pavement. They're looking at their smartphone and they bump into a lamppost or they stumble down steps. Or I've even seen one where somebody stumbles into a pond.

[5 : 20] Why? Because they're looking at their smartphone. And that's where they're looking. They're not looking anywhere else. And that's where they're looking. And they get into all kinds of trouble. But, you know, it's not just smartphones.

In life, our vision is often dangerously restricted. We look down at the details of our lives and problems and aspirations.

We look down at how much we're earning and how much we want to earn and the car we want to own and the obstacles on the way. We look down and that's where we're looking. It's the direction of sight.

We look back at our frustrations and failures with regret and resentment. We look around us with an undue concern for the opinions and the approval of others.

Looking around. We look ahead with fear as to what the future holds. And God says, look up. Lift your eyes and look up.

[6 : 22] Look in the right direction. You've got issues with me. Fine. Let's deal with them. Look at me. Lift up your eyes and look. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens.

And when we look up, what do we see? And what are we to do in the light of what we see? These are the two questions I want us to reflect on this morning in the light of what Isaiah says in our passage.

What do we see? What do we see? And what are we to do in the light of what we see? Before trying to answer these two questions, we do need to clean up one other preliminary question.

How do we look up? It's very grand language. Look up. What does that actually mean? How do we look up and see God and his works?

We look up and around and see God's handiwork in the universe. But we also look up as we listen up to his voice speak from heaven in his word.

[7 : 29] The Bible. Now, Isaiah makes reference to that in this passage in verse 21. He reminds the people of Israel, do you not know? Have you not heard?

Has it not been told to you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He's saying, God has spoken. You know these things. Look up and listen up.

It's really what the prophet is saying to this people who have issues with God. Well, let's turn to these two questions.

As we lift up our eyes, as we look up, what do we see? And I think what we're given, what the prophet provides us as this sight to behold, is a portrait of our incompatible God.

Indeed, the very language is the language that is used here. Isaiah uses it in verse 18. To whom then will you compare God? The prophet says, our God is incomparable.

[8 : 36] God himself uses this very language of himself. In verse 25, it is God who is posing the question, to whom will you compare me?

Or who is my equal, says the Holy One. The prophet acknowledges God as the incompatible God. God describes himself as the incompatible God.

And from verse 12 right through to verse 24, we have painted for us a portrait of our incompatible God. And let me divide what is said by identifying four ways in which God is incompatible, without equal, without rival.

He's incompatible. He's incompatible in power. He's incompatible in wisdom. He's incompatible in dignity. And he's incompatible in sovereign authority.

Let's look at each of these in turn in the light of what Isaiah says. First of all, our God is incompatible, without equal, without rival, in power.

[9 : 40] Verse 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 and the scales and the hills in a balance?

Of course, here the verse particularly highlights God's creative power. In a few choice words, we're given a simple and yet beautiful description of God's creative power.

I want to just flag up three aspects of this power that are touched on or hinted at in this verse. First of all, that the scale of God's creation, the waters and the heavens and the earth that together constitute the whole universe, are the product of God's creative power and genius.

And as we were thinking about with the children, Isaiah paints this striking poetic picture of the span of God's hand as sufficient to hold the universe in all its vastness.

From the tip of his little finger to the tip of his thumb, more than sufficient to hold all that he has created. The scale of his creation and yet has nothing for God.

[11 : 00] And of course, we might just note that Isaiah and his original audience would have had little notion as to the vastness of the universe, or certainly a very limited notion.

In verse 25, Isaiah speaks of the starry host. In verse 26, rather, he who brings out the starry host one by one.

And how God calls each star by name. Now for Isaiah and for us, it's possible with the naked eye to see and count around 5,000 stars.

So I'm told. I've never tried to do that. But apparently, that's something we would be able to do with the naked eye. If we could scan the firmament and the skies were clear, I guess.

But we know, thanks to advances and telescope technology and astronomy and such like, we know that there are a few more stars than that in the universe.

[12 : 04] Those who know about these things tell us that in the Milky Way alone, our neighborhood galaxy, you have something around 400 billion stars.

And there are, so we're told, something about 125 billion galaxies. I don't know if there's the same number of stars in each galaxy.

That would seem unlikely. But if you do the maths, or others have done it for me, that leads you to a total of about 10 billion trillion stars.

I had to look down at my notes here, because it's not the kind of thing you can just remember off the top of your head. Give or take a few billion. And remember, God calls them each by name.

The scale of his creative power is mind-boggling. But not only the scale, this verse touches on the precision of God's creative activity.

[13 : 01] Notice the language used, and we really can only skim over these things. He's measured the waters. He's marked off the heavens. He's held the dust. He's weighed the mountains. There is this picture of precision in his creative activity.

But also, and perhaps this is even more striking, we kind of touched on it already, that the ease with which God creates. There's no suggestion that any of this creative activity was difficult for God.

You know, what about the Milky Way and its 400 billion stars? A piece of cake. The Milky Way, a piece of cake.

You never heard Carl Sagan or Brian Cox give you that bit of information. A piece of cake for God. The ease with which he has created all that he has created.

Our God is incomparable in power. And Israel needed to lift up its eyes and see their God. Incomparable in power.

[14 : 04] If they were doubting if he was able, they needed to lift up their eyes and behold and observe. And as they needed to lift up their eyes, so you too need to lift up your eyes and see your God.

Incomparable in power for whom nothing is impossible. But we need to move on. Incomparable also in wisdom. Verse 13.

Who has understood the mind of the Lord or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him? And who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding?

Incomparable in wisdom. God is all sufficient in the matter of wisdom. He has no need for counselors or special advisors or experts or a cabinet. He is all sufficient in himself, in his triune being.

All sufficient. And God is all knowing. Who was it that taught him knowledge? He knows everything. He knows the end from the beginning. He knows the number of the stars and the secrets of the oceans.

[15 : 13] He knows your heart. Nothing is hidden from his all-seeing eye. He knows everything. And God is all wise. Again, notice the vocabulary employed by the prophet.

Understanding the right way. This knowledge is used in a way that is wise. It's not simply quantity of knowledge that is true of God.

But there is a wisdom in his use of that knowledge. And Israel needed to lift up its eyes and see their God.

Incomparable in wisdom. And more than able to show them the right way in the midst of their many trials. And you need to look up and see your God.

Incomparable in wisdom. I don't know how complicated your life is. How complex your problems. How messed up your relationships.

[16 : 17] How unpayable your debts. I don't know any of these things. But I know one thing. That your God knows the right way for you to go. He has all understanding.

And he is able and willing to share that understanding with you in the midst of your life. And of your problems. And of your challenges. The one who is incompatible in wisdom.

But the prophet also portrays God. As incompatible in dignity. In verses 15 to 17. We have this contrast painted.

And again we need to skirt over what the prophet says. But the heart of the matter in these verses. Is the contrast that is drawn between God and the nations of the world. It almost appears as if God is bad mouthing the nations of the world.

Verse 17. Before him all the nations are as nothing. They are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. It is not really that God is bad mouthing the nations. He created them and values them.

[17 : 21] But what is being presented. Is being presented in a way to make clear that this contrast. That in contrast to God the nations are as nothing.

And this God who towers over the nations. Is alone worthy of tribute and worship. Indeed the dignity and the worthiness of God demands tribute and worship.

But then that raises an issue. What can we bring to such a God that would be suitable. That would be appropriate. That would be fitting.

And this is the very quandary that is acknowledged in verse 16. Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires. Nor its animals enough for burnt offerings. What is Isaiah suggesting?

He's suggesting well imagine we offered the whole of the nation of Lebanon. As a tribute to this God. The whole nation. And notice how it speaks of the altar fires.

[18 : 27] Now we all know that the one thing Lebanon is most famous for certainly in the Bible is its cedars. And so here Isaiah is saying well imagine the nation with the best forestry in the world.

With the most amazing trees. Well imagine if we offered all of that. Wouldn't be enough. Wouldn't be enough. The whole of a nation insufficient as a tribute to this God.

So he's worthy of worship. He's worthy of our tribute. But what can we bring? That's the problem. Let me just leave you with the problem. We'll come to a solution in a moment.

But for the moment let's just leave the problem there hanging. Incompatible indignity. Israel needed to lift up its eyes and behold their God. Incompatible indignity and worthiness.

And we need to do likewise. But then there's this fourth aspect. Incompatible in sovereign authority. From verses 22 through to 24.

[19 : 30] This is the picture that is painted. He sits enthroned upon the circle of the earth and its people are like grasshoppers. And Isaiah goes on.

This authority of our incomparable God. This authority is a permanent authority. God permanently provides oversight and control over all of the created order.

And he does so as the one who sits enthroned above the circle of the earth. Ever vigilant. Ever in control. Ever governing.

All that there is. A permanent authority. But also we might call it a particular authority. Over the nations.

But also over every grasshopper. Or man, woman and child. What a great leveler. The language of the prophet. Before God.

[20 : 27] We're all just like grasshoppers. Each and every one of us. However exalted or important or influential or wealthy that we might be in this little world of ours.

Before God. From his standpoint. All of us. Just like grasshoppers. But among the grasshoppers, of course, there are.

In human society. There are princes and rulers. And of course the psalmist. Or rather the prophet acknowledges that. In verse 23.

He brings princes to naught. Reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. God exercises particular, minute control. Over each and every one of the princes and rulers and authorities of this world.

The very men who were causing so much grief to Israel that led to their complaint and the issues that they had with God. And of course we see that today.

[21 : 28] When the time ordained by God comes, he blows on the high and mighty. And they wither. Look at Robert Mugabe.

The man who ruled supreme over Zimbabwe. Unchallenged for nearly 40 years. But the time came for God to blow. And now he cuts a withered and pathetic figure.

I don't know if you saw him yesterday on the TV. He was on day release from his house arrest to attend a graduation ceremony. And then he proceeded to snooze through the ceremony.

His power gone. His vigor gone. His life ebbing away. Because God decided. Until now. And no longer.

You see Israel needed to lift up its eyes and look and see their God. Incomparable in sovereign authority. And having looked, they then needed to look around and see the emperors and tyrants that troubled them in their true dimension.

[22 : 37] Just grasshoppers soon to be trodden on by the footprint of the Almighty. You see there is a pastoral intention in the words of Isaiah. Don't be despondent.

Don't despair. Look up and see your God. And be emboldened and be encouraged. Because your God is God.

The God who is incomparable in power. And of course you too need to lift up your eyes and see your God. Incomparable in authority.

That was the first question. What do we see when we look up? But more briefly, let's pose and answer the second question. What are we to do in the light of what we see?

We lift up our eyes and we see our God. Incomparable in power. Incomparable in authority. Incomparable in dignity. Incomparable in sovereign authority.

[23 : 35] Incomparable in sovereign authority. What are we to do having seen what we see? Well I think Israel needed to do two things.

And I think you need to do two things. In the light of what you see as you lift up your eyes to the heavens. First of all you need to trust God. Do you remember that the issues that Israel had with God?

We began trying to identify the issues that Israel had with God. What were those issues? He didn't know. He didn't know. Let's remind ourselves.

What did they say? My way is hidden from the Lord. This God of ours. He doesn't know what's going on. He doesn't know what I'm facing. He doesn't know the danger I'm in. He doesn't know how I'm suffering.

He doesn't know. What was the other issue? He doesn't care. My way is disregarded by the Lord. This God of ours. He doesn't care about us.

[24 : 36] What was the other issue? He isn't able. Even if he does care he's not able to help. My problems are too great. My enemies are too powerful. He doesn't know.

He doesn't care. He isn't able. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. As you lift up your eyes to the heavens.

And see your God. You see that the God of the scriptures. The living and true God. Is a God who knows everything. A God who is able to do everything.

A God who cares. Profoundly and intimately. For each of his own. So lift up your eyes to the heavens. And trust in this God.

He is altogether trustworthy. He promises and he delivers. He cares and he is able. He's able and he is willing.

[25 : 35] As we look into the heavens. And we look into God's word. We discover that our incompatible God. Knows everything. Cares deeply. And is altogether able.

He knows you. And he cares for you. And he's able to help you. You need to trust God. There's one other thing. That you need to do.

That we all need to do. You need to worship God. But how? How are we to worship God? How are we to approach this incompatible God?

Is the very. Is it not the case. That his very. Greatness. Makes him. Somehow distant. And unapproachable. What tribute or offering can we bring?

You remember the problem that Isaiah identifies in verse 16. Lebanon. The whole of Lebanon wouldn't be tribute sufficient. I don't suppose any of you here own a nation state.

[26 : 37] If you do let me know. A small donation towards church funds would be greatly appreciated. But I don't imagine anybody here owns a nation state. Be that Lebanon or Wales or Uzbekistan.

Randomly plucking nation states out of the top of my head. Well if you do. I've got news for you. It's not enough. If you want to bring tribute to God.

It's not enough. It won't be enough. If you say look God. This is what I want to give you. To gain your favor. The whole of Uzbekistan.

All of it. Not enough. It's not enough. And it's not just that any offering we bring would fall short in the light of God's dignity and worthiness.

There's also the big problem of our sin. That stands as a barrier between us and God. What possible tribute or sacrifice could be sufficient and acceptable to God?

[27 : 38] Nothing in this world is sufficient. What about something out of this world? Nothing in this world is sufficient.

But what about something out of this world? And you say well now you're just getting silly. How are the likes of you and me going to secure a sacrifice, a tribute that is out of this world?

We can't. But our incompatible God. Incompatible in grace and love and mercy. Has given us such a sacrifice. God has provided a sacrifice.

An offering that is out of this world but that has come into this world. This is the spectacular truth that Isaiah will soon reveal in chapter 53 of this very book.

God's provision of a suitable and sufficient offering to atone for sin and secure peace with God. The offering of his own son.

[28 : 45] An offering that is out of this world. But that came into this world. To offer himself as a sufficient and suitable offering to our incompatible God.

And to deal with our immeasurable sin. Lebanon isn't sufficient. But Jesus is. Lebanon isn't sufficient.

But Jesus is. Of course we don't offer Jesus. He offered himself up to death in our place. But we do trust in him. And in his sufficient sacrifice in our place.

We worship God in the name of Jesus. And trusting in the merits of his finished work. Are you trusting in Jesus? As your only and sufficient and suitable savior?

Have you got issues with God? Do you, like Israel of old, question if he really knows you?

[29 : 53] If he really cares about you? If he's really able to help you? Lift up your eyes. And look to the heavens.

Let us pray. Have a nice day. Have a nice day. Have a nice day.