



BACKGROUND FOR THE BIBLE PASSAGES

Session 1: Developing a Worldview

Isaiah 40:12-26

•Because God is over all, His worldview is correct.

Everyone has a worldview, or a lens, through which he or she views his or her origin, purpose, and destiny. Whether or not we realize it, all of us have perceptions of God, ourselves, and the world that shape our beliefs and our behavior. Many of those perceptions are the products of religious heritage and personal experience, which may or may not have any valid biblical basis. It is at this intersection of biblical truth and personal opinion that we must choose which road to travel. We will either base our lives on the uncertain and ever-changing ideals of this world or the unchanging and eternal truth of God's Word. The choice is obvious once we discover the person and power of God through the Scripture.

The Book of Isaiah can be broken down into two distinct sections. The first 39 chapters describe the disastrous results of God's impending judgment. The remainder of the book anticipates a future restoration that is inevitable because of the incomprehensible greatness of God.

Isaiah began to sketch out his portrait of God's greatness by reflecting first on His enormous size. Several images that deal with measurement are used here in order to demonstrate the immeasurable magnitude of God. Each of the questions presented in this passage assume the exclusive answer that God alone can accomplish the seemingly impossible.

Isaiah declared that God is big enough to hold all the waters of the earth in the palm of His hand. He is so huge that He can measure all of heaven using the distance between His thumb and little finger. I remember learning about appropriate measurements in my elementary math class. We would be given something to measure, and then we had to decide whether inches, yards, or miles should be used. For example, if I wanted to measure the distance I walked for exercise, I wouldn't go outside with a yardstick and start measuring it off that way. Instead, I'd use the odometer in my car and measure the distance in miles, not inches or feet. If God's hand is an appropriate measure for the waters of the earth or the

span of the heavens, then He is much bigger than we could ever dream or imagine Him to be.

Another image used by Isaiah is that of the dust and dirt that covers every square inch of dry land on the earth. Imagine digging up all the dirt on the entire planet and depositing it into one single pile, only to discover that God is even taller than that massive mound of dirt. He is huge, and with the vastness of His stature comes enough strength to lift even the tallest of mountains. Although God is Spirit and does not dwell in a body like ours, these images are intended to help us contemplate the scope of His greatness.

Only when we discover the hugeness of God can we develop a proper perspective of ourselves and the world around us. As God becomes bigger to us, we automatically become smaller in our own eyes. In fact, when we begin to grasp the mighty magnitude of God's stature, *everything* else diminishes in size and significance.

Not only is the sheer size of God immeasurable, but the mind of God is absolutely incomprehensible. With our finite mental capacity, we the created cannot possibly understand or interpret the thoughts and plans of our infinite Creator. In this passage, Isaiah posed several thought-provoking questions designed to unveil God's intellectual superiority over all creation. The idea of counsel, advice, or teaching in these questions presumes that the one giving advice has access to information unavailable to the one receiving advice. For example, Isaiah's Babylonian contemporaries worshiped and taught about a false god named Marduk, who required the advice and assistance of other gods in creating the world. Almighty God could never be the recipient of counsel since there is absolutely no knowledge or truth that is inaccessible to Him. There will never be new data or additional information discovered by man that is not already known in the mind of God. One of the major differences between God and people is that some of us *think* we know it all, but God really does.

God's size gives Him power to *control* all things, and His mind gives Him the ability to *know* all things. Because of the immeasurable size and incomprehensible mind of God, individuals and kingdoms pale in comparison. Isaiah said that even

the most powerful and influential nations were nothing more than a “drop in a bucket” compared to the greatness of God. Lebanon is mentioned here because it was a great forest area north of Israel, known for its abundant wood and variety of animals. Yet, with its vast wood supply and large animal population, even Lebanon could not build enough altars or sacrifice enough animals to do justice to the greatness of God.

The most powerful entities on the earth at this time were the nations who controlled large portions of the developed land and populated cities. People were often enslaved to foreign governments who had conquered their countries and held them hostage. Godless leaders abused their authority and poor, helpless captives cowered beneath the mighty arm of evil regimes. As great and mighty as these nations and rulers may have appeared to their subjects, they become as nothing when held up next to God. It’s amazing how our perspective of someone or something is affected by what we compare it to. If I pull into a parking space next to a beat up “hooptie” from a previous generation, I feel pretty good about what I’m driving. But if the vehicle beside me happens to be a brand new luxury sedan with all the bells and whistles, then I start feeling dissatisfied with my car. The strongest, smartest, most influential world power becomes essentially non-existent when parked next to God.

Now that Isaiah has established the supremacy of God’s power and position, it should become obvious to us that we cannot mold or shape Him into our desired image. We could never capture the splendor and majesty of God if we attempted to create an idol in His likeness. In our vain attempts, we might cover the idol with the purest of gold, but it will only serve to disguise what is woefully deficient beneath the surface. False gods are always like that. They look good on the outside, boasting of things they can never deliver. But beneath the surface, they are no more powerful than the people who worship them. Only God can deliver what He promises because He is both separate from and sovereign over His creation. His ways are always right, His words always true, and his judgments always perfect. Isaiah said the throne of God is raised above the earth so that people look like grasshoppers from the vantage point of heaven. That statement does not demean the value of people, but

on the contrary, it magnifies the love of a God who would stop at nothing to redeem them.

It is not only important for us to understand the *supremacy* of God over all creation, but also the *security* that protects His power and position. Throughout history, people have risen to powerful positions of influence, but there are at least two reasons why the rule of God is safe and secure. The power of man is limited and his position is only temporary, while God possesses unlimited strength and occupies an eternal position. In an athletic competition, there can only be one winner, and in a corporation, there can only be one CEO. Only one can be the greatest, strongest, or smartest. In the hierarchy of the universe, there’s only room for one at the top—and that position has been eternally secured by the One who created the heavens and the earth. He sustains all of creation and knows every star by name. Because He is God, He always has the final word. Because He is over all, only His worldview is correct.

Isaiah 55:8-9

•Without God, our worldviews are wrong.

Throughout the ages, man has been on a perpetual journey to understand God—to “figure out” who He is and what He is doing in the world. The search continues even today because man’s finite efforts to grasp an infinite God have failed miserably and consistently. The reason for this failure is the gigantic gulf that separates created man from Creator God. Nowhere is this gulf more evident than in God’s divine plan to redeem His fallen creation. He certainly didn’t do it the way most of us would have done it. But then again, He’s God and we’re not—and that’s a very good thing.

The primary interpretation of this passage is in the context of redemption. In the preceding verses of this chapter, Isaiah prophesied about the *free* gift of pardon from sin because of God’s mercy (v. 7). The idea that something so valuable could be obtained *freely* was just as foreign to the original readers of this Book as it is to us today. That’s precisely why Isaiah warned them not to examine God’s actions through the lens of personal experience or religious background. We would do well to heed that same warning.

One common denominator that links Isaiah with his modern readers is a performance-based culture.

In Isaiah's time, people were driven to perform in an effort to obtain favor with God. Today, we perform because our achievements are rewarded and our failures are punished. If you work hard enough, you can get a promotion. If you train hard enough, you can play first string. But one thing you can never get in this culture is something for nothing. Just this morning, I ignored a pop-up advertisement on my computer that flashed with the bright colors of celebration. I was selected to win a free video game that is in great demand and retails for over \$300. So why didn't I respond to this ad with eager enthusiasm? Because I'm painfully aware of the universal truth that nothing is really free. There's always a catch somewhere or a hidden message in the fine print.

That's why it's so hard for us to comprehend a salvation that is truly free. Without realizing it, we have fashioned God into our own image so that we can't imagine Him doing what we would never do ourselves. We would not think of letting someone off the hook who repeatedly hurt or offended us. Even Peter suggested a limit to the number of times one person could be acquitted for the same crime (Matt. 18:21-22). Human nature and personal experience make it difficult to grasp the limitless mercy of God that reaches the least deserving and rescues repeat offenders. That's why Isaiah warned us against ascribing attributes to God simply because they're true of us. Be grateful He's not like we are.

Specifically, where the plan of salvation is concerned, God does not think or act like we do. But the secondary interpretation of this passage says that, in general, God's thoughts and actions are completely divergent from ours, as well. There are two key words in this passage that are helpful in making a personal application. First of all, the word for *thoughts* refers to something much broader than the information residing in the mind of God. It literally refers to the overall purposes and intentions of God for a particular person or circumstance. Secondly, the word interpreted as *ways* is used to indicate the direction of movement. For example, if I'm planning to follow you from my house to an unknown location, I might ask the question, "Which *way* are you going?" By that, I'm asking what path you're going to follow so that I know which streets to take and where to turn. The destination determines the direction.

These verses are a lot like a complex math problem. If you can work through the first half, the second

half makes a whole lot more sense. The first part of this passage says that God's thoughts (purposes, intentions) are nothing like ours. God's goals for us are usually quite different from the goals we have for ourselves. His list of priorities often bears very little similarity to ours. This is crucial in our understanding of this passage because different destinations dictate different directions. That means if our personal goals conflict with God's goals for us, then we're going to question His leadership constantly. We will have difficulty understanding what God is doing in our lives because He's moving in a different direction than we are. Until our thoughts and plans come into alignment with God's, our lives will be characterized by constant conflict and tension. We have to choose between our way and God's way; we have to abandon our own fallible concept of what is true and right to embrace God's faultless and eternal truth. Without God, our worldviews are wrong.

Romans 12:1-2

•We are to align our worldview with God's worldview.

The Book of Romans answers the question, "How can a sinful person be made right with a holy God?" The Jews in Rome believed that a relationship with God was the product of such things as heritage, adherence to the law, and circumcision. Paul confronted and corrected these misconceptions by proving that the only way to be righteous in the eyes of God is through faith. Forgiveness of sin and life with purpose is the gracious and free gift of God to those who sincerely believe. It is this message of God's mercy that forms the basis of Paul's exhortation in chapter 12.

This message was written to the *brothers* at Rome, which indicates both Jewish and Gentile believers. Because of God's mercy, we as Christians are encouraged to offer ourselves as *living sacrifices*. The idea of offering or presenting ourselves to God comes from a word that is also translated *to yield*. We understand the concept of yielding best in a traffic scenario where we allow someone else to have the right of way. We slow down in order to let another driver go ahead of us, rather than speeding up to get ahead of them. This is very similar to the spiritual concept of yielding. We slow down in carrying out our own plans and purposes to allow God to have the right of way in our lives. Yielding means we allow Him to be the leader and we choose to follow, rather

than running ahead of God and expecting Him to follow us. It also means that where our beliefs and His truth are in conflict, we change what we believe.

The idea of yielding our bodies as living sacrifices grows out of the Old Testament practice of sacrificial offerings. An animal was offered by a priest, but presented by a person who transferred ownership to God by laying hands on the head of the sacrifice. When we offer ourselves as living sacrifices, we are transferring ownership of our entire lives to God. We no longer have the right to call the shots or have the final say in how we think or act. That right belongs exclusively to God if we have soberly and sincerely placed ourselves on the altar of sacrifice.

In order for the sacrifice of our lives to be acceptable to God, it has to meet two nonnegotiable requirements. First, it has to be a living sacrifice. Jesus was the final sacrifice of atonement so that an offering of death is no longer necessary to appease the justice of God. It is a mark of our spiritual maturity *not* that we will die for Him, but that we will live for Him. Second, our sacrifice must be holy if we want it to please the Father. Holiness is part of God's character so that as we become holy, we are being conformed to His very nature. It is only when we offer ourselves as living and holy sacrifices that God is fully pleased. It's not so much about sacrificing things *for* Him as it is about sacrificing ourselves *to* Him.

The foundation of a sacrifice that is pleasing to God is the renewal of our minds. The mind is the seat of reasoning and judgment so that it ultimately controls how we think, feel, and act. In this passage, when Paul refers to the renewing of the mind, he is literally talking about the renewal of the whole man. The greatest enemy to *renewing* our minds is *conforming* our minds to the pattern of this world. Paul's challenge to us is that we would not be molded or shaped by cultural trends or political correctness, but by the steady unchanging truth of God.

The obvious alternative to conforming our minds to the pattern of this world is transforming our minds by the power of the Word. The term *transformed* comes from the same root of the English word *metamorphosis*, which refers to a radical change in form, such as a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly. As we renew our minds by God's truth and grow in spiritual maturity, we will become increasingly more like Christ. We will think like He thinks, feel what He feels, and do what He does.

Spiritual growth is marked as one moves from a life of self-centeredness to one of Christ-centeredness. It's important to remember that becoming a child of God takes only a moment, but becoming like Him takes a lifetime. Spiritual transformation is not an event that takes place but a process that takes time. One of the greatest benefits of our metamorphosis is that we discover what is pleasing to God and we desire to do it. As we align our will to God's will, we align our worldview to God's worldview.