

# Trusting the Holy Creator GOD



*A Six Week Study of Isaiah 40  
Created for the Hillsdale Free Methodist Church  
Lent 2008*

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For sheer grandeur and majesty probably no book in the Hebrew Bible can be compared with Isaiah. Because the New Testament writers made frequent appeal to the book in presenting their claims about the nature of Jesus and the church, Isaiah assumed a role of particular importance in Christian interpretation. (Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 267)

Of all the writing prophets, Isaiah is justly accounted the greatest. His prophecy is one of the longest, is quoted more frequently than any other in the New Testament, and he more often than any other prophet tells of the coming Messiah. (Irving L. Jensen, *Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament*, p. 319)

I think that by any computation, or from any angle whatsoever, Isaiah chapter 40 must be regarded as one of the most eloquent and moving chapters in the Bible. (D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The All-Sufficient God: Sermons on Isaiah 40*, p. 1)

On December 30th, Pastor Keith gave a 30 minute message on Isaiah 40. But, 30 minutes hardly does justice to a passage that is packed full of encouragement, instruction, doctrine, and important lessons that we in the 21st Century American Church need to receive. Therefore, the Small Group Leaders wanted to offer this opportunity for small groups throughout the church to spend the next six weeks in anticipation and preparation for Easter by making a more thorough investigation of Isaiah 40.

It is the hope of Pastor Keith, the Small Group Leaders, and your specific small group leader that this will be a beneficial study that will challenge some of your current ideas, thoughts and beliefs and that we might discover some things about the God of the Universe that will make Him bigger, more compassionate and more gracious than you ever imagined before. Ultimately, we pray that by coming to this further understanding of God and His nature, you will learn to trust Him more and more and thus, not only grow in your faith, but reap the benefits of a life of faith in Christ as well. It is our desire, therefore, to exalt, and magnify our God and His Son Jesus Christ through God's revelation of Himself in Isaiah chapter 40 as we approach and celebrate Easter this year.

**Presuppositions/Assumptions:** Whenever you approach any piece of literature or study, there are certain ideas or positions that are assumed or presupposed as you come to that piece. Generally it is much easier to understand the literature or study if you know ahead of time the assumptions the author is making. Therefore, I would like to list some of the

presuppositions or assumptions that I am making as I write this study.

1- The Bible (Isaiah 40) is the very Word of God given and preserved for us so that we might have revealed to us from God the reality or the truth about our world, ourselves and our God.

2- The Book of Isaiah was written originally for the people of ancient Judah & Jerusalem, but that, according to Jesus (Luke 24:25-27) the early disciples (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and to the early church, Isaiah is also beneficial to us as well. Isaiah reveals to us God's nature, and the hope of the salvation that can be found by trusting in Him. So, even though the book was originally written to a people 2700 years ago living in a land nearly half-way around the globe; it is still relevant and useful for us today here in 21st century America.

3- Isaiah 40 has been written by one Isaiah (not two or more) around 700 BC. The sections of the book of Isaiah that give predictive prophecy, that were not to occur for another 200 - 700 years, were given by inspiration to Isaiah from God's Holy Spirit so that Isaiah had divine comprehension of events and details that normal humans are not capable of obtaining or perceiving. Therefore, when theologians doubt the authenticity of a single Isaiah, they are in fact doubting the reality of God's ability or desire to communicate such supernatural details to mere humans in such a fashion that they could possibly be understood and comprehended so they could be written, preserved and now read by us 2700 years later.

4- The Holy Spirit is able to, yet today, reveal and give to us an understanding and comprehension of the original message and theme so that we (even 2700 years later) might have access to the same supernatural ideas, thoughts, and understanding of God and His Word that Isaiah had when he first saw the vision from God and wrote it down.

### **Historical Context:**

The Book of Isaiah was written by Isaiah the prophet as he explains in 1:1. Isaiah lived at the time of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, or approximately 730 to 690 BC.

Isaiah writes in the first 39 chapters of the influence and invasion of Assyria into Israel to the North and eventually into Judah/Jerusalem to the South.

Isaiah 40 begins a whole new section of the book. In fact, a number of theologians believe that Isaiah chapters 40-66 must have been written by a second Isaiah because the content and themes are so radically different than those of Isaiah 1-39. Personally, I believe that one Isaiah is merely showing the hope what we have in the Lord once we are willing to admit and confess our need for Him. The author of Isaiah 1-39 has been pushing for his audience to realize their desperate need for repentance and coming back to the Lord with all their heart, mind, soul and strength and to no longer trust in the ideas, resources, power and notions of mankind, but to seek the Lord first and trust in Him with all their hearts and not lean on their own understanding but in all their ways to acknowledge Him so that He could make their paths straight (Proverbs 3:5-6). In Isaiah 40-66 the author is trying to demonstrate the benefits of a life that trusts in the Lord and makes God Lord and King of their lives: Shalom (peace, long life and prosperity) will be restored, and God will accept and forgive their sins

based upon their faith and the vicarious work of the Suffering Servant (Revealed in Isaiah 42; 43 & 49-53).

This is a short, 6 week study designed for the Hillsdale Free Methodist Church to prepare them and enhance their worship and intensify their Easter Celebration. The lesson themes for each of the six week are as follows:

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## WEEK 1:

**Theme:** God is the great Paraclete (comforter)

**Focus:** God is able to bring divine comfort to those who find themselves in distress, misery or sorrow. But, it is only those who are healthy and sane who know the reality of their present predicament and who can be truly comforted. Neither God nor mankind can comfort someone who is ignorant of their distress, misery or sorrow or someone who fails to admit they have a problem or need.

God has attempted to reveal to the people of ancient Israel (as well as to us today) their (our) distress as they will one day be taken as captives to a foreign land (we've been taken captive by an ungodly and foreign culture). In fact, they are already captive to their own sins and wickedness (see Isaiah 5:18 & Romans 6). God will one day return them once again to their homeland to show His grace, mercy and forgiveness. The reason why we do not see God as the Great God of comfort is because we are not aware of the extent of our distress, misery, or sorrow. We are, in spiritual terms, delusional, and insane. Furthermore, God comforts in a way that will allow us to become what we were supposed to become. He does not comfort us as we dictate for we do not know what we need. Many times we are ignorant of what God is doing in and for and through us to bring us real and lasting comfort. How does this ignorance, affect how we see God as our Great Comforter? This is the focus of our study this week.

**Cultural Context:** It has been so long since Israel has followed the Lord with all her heart and mind. Judah's elders and leaders have been to blame for their ignorance and unrealistic view of their world, God and themselves. Throughout the book of Isaiah, he has been pointing out the perverted understanding of the facts of their situation (see Isaiah 1:2-3, 5-9, 21-23; 5:13, 20-25; 6:9-12; etc.). Chapter 40 begins with Isaiah reassuring the people of Judah/Jerusalem that they can look to God to bring them their much needed comfort when they face bondage, trials, enslavement, sin, pain, suffering and even death itself.

To illustrate human blindness, please read this brief letter of a WWII German soldier to his sweetheart Greta. Please note the basis of reality for him.

We are entirely alone, without help from outside. Hitler has left us in the lurch. If the airfield is still in our possession, this letter may still get out. ...So this is what the end looks like. Hannes and I will not surrender; yesterday, after our infantry had retaken a position, I saw four men who had been taken prisoner by the Russians. No, we shall not go into captivity. When Stalingrad has fallen, you'll hear and read it. And then you'll know that I shall not come back.

...The Fuhrer made a firm promise to bail us out of here; they read it to us and we believed in it firmly. Even now I still believe it, because I have to believe in something. If it is not true, what else could I believe in? I would no longer need spring, summer, or anything that gives pleasure. So leave me my faith, dear Greta; all my life, at least eight years of it, I believed in the Fuhrer and his word. It is terrible how they doubt here, and shameful to listen to what they say without being able to reply, because they have the facts on their side. (C. L. Sugzberger, *The American Heritage Picture History of World War II*, pp. 298, 99)

- 1- What is the basis of this soldier's reality? What is the basis of this soldier's hope?
- 2- Why does he choose to believe Hitler and not evidence?
- 3- Have you ever tried to help someone who didn't think they needed help? What has been your experience in this situation?
- 4- Were there any circumstances that made this situation especially hard to deal with?
- 5- What reaction did you get from the person you were trying to help when they finally realized you thought they had a problem that you wanted to help them with?
- 6- What could you have done to bring the reality of their need to light? What problems did this create?
- 7- In what ways is the German soldier aware of his need for help? In what ways is the German soldier ignorant of his need for help?

There is no use preaching a gospel of forgiveness to those who feel no need of forgiveness. But how swift is the answer of divine mercy to a sinner's cry! Isaiah's confession is hardly uttered before forgiveness is on its way, and the shining one has touched his stained lips with the fire of God's cleansing. (*The Interpreter's Bible*, p. 206)

- 8- Why do you think we humans have a proclivity to ignore or be blind to our weaknesses or needs?

### **Reading God's Word:**

{1}Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.  
{2}Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her  
that her hard service has been completed,  
that her sin has been paid for,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins.

9- Do you happen to know why the people of ancient Israel might be in need of comfort?

10- What is significant about God telling Isaiah to say that he is to comfort **HIS** people? What do you know about the historical context that might have made this comment by God calling Jerusalem “His people” significant?

11- What do you think God means when He tells Isaiah to write, “proclaim to her that her **hard service has been completed**, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins”? What is the hard service mentioned here?

12- Why has God demanded that Jerusalem **pay for her sins**? What does this tell you about the nature of God?

**THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM: Questions 12-18:**

**12 Q. According to God's righteous judgment we deserve punishment both in this world and forever after: how then can we escape this punishment and return to God's favor?**

A. God requires that his justice be satisfied. Therefore the claims of his justice must be paid in full, either by ourselves or another.

**13 Q. Can we pay this debt ourselves?**

A. Certainly not. Actually, we increase our guilt every day.

**14 Q. Can another creature—any at all—pay this debt for us?**

A. No. To begin with, God will not punish another creature for what a human is guilty of. Besides, no mere creature can bear the weight of God's eternal anger against sin and release others from it.

**15 Q. What kind of mediator and deliverer should we look for then?**

A. One who is truly human and truly righteous, yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, one who is also true God.

**16 Q. Why must he be truly human and truly righteous?**

A. God's justice demands that human nature, which has sinned, must pay for its sin; but a sinner could never pay for others.

**17 Q. Why must he also be true God?**

A. So that, by the power of his divinity, he might bear the weight of God's anger in his humanity and earn for us and restore to us righteousness and life.

**18 Q. And who is this mediator—true God and at the same time truly human and truly**

**righteous?**

A. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was given us to set us completely free and to make us right with God. (*The Heidelberg Catechism*, pp. 13-14)

13- What do you think is meant by “that she has received from the Lord's hand **double** for all her sins”? Why is this mentioned in context with God bringing comfort? What must we first be willing to recognize before we will see God’s “paying double for all our sins” as a great comfort?

Imagine for a moment this insightful story conveyed to me by Pastor Tim Keller of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NYC.

You have had someone watch your house for you while you were gone on vacation. You know, feed the cat, water the plants, pick up your mail and newspaper and generally keep an eye on things while you were gone to insure that all is well when you come home.

When you do come home, the person who watched your house comes over to greet you and give you an update on their care of your house and belongings while you were gone. After giving you the report they casually mention, “O by the way, I paid a bill for you.”

How do you respond? Do you give them a casual, “Thanks” or do you get on your knees in gratitude and humility because they were so kind and generous to do this great thing for you?

Well, you don’t know how to react and you don’t know the extent of your gratitude until you know the size of the bill they were willing to pay for you while you were gone.

You see if the person watching your house paid a postage due of \$.41, then a simple, casual and modest “thank-you” would be more than adequate and proper. But, if the IRS sent a bill for \$40,000.00 to be paid immediately or else they were going to begin foreclosure proceedings on your property, then you really are obligated to give more than a simple, casual and modest “thank-you”. In fact, a groveling, kissing of the feet of the person who was willing to pay your \$40,000.00 bill might be more in line with what would be expected.

What is the difference? The extent of the debt. We will be comforted and we will be full of gratitude to the extent that we KNOW of the grace extended to us by another.

14- What is the extent of our debt before God? What then should be the extent of our comfort and gratitude? Why do we fail to have the proper comfort and gratitude that we should? How can we change this ignorance?

Jesus talks about this same scenario in the story found in Luke 7:36-50. Read that now if you would please.



15- Jesus says that the woman loved much because she had been forgiven much (47). What was necessary for the woman to know to love Jesus much?

16- What can we say about the Pharisees' and Simon's love for Jesus?

17- Were the Pharisees and Simon aware of their sin and need of forgiveness? Do you suppose this can account for their lack of love for Jesus?

It is foolish for us to think that we can somehow serve God until we have come to the end of ourselves. As long as we think there is some hope of a human solution to our problems, there is little chance of our genuinely seeing God. Nor is there hope for any of us becoming servants of the living God without there first being an adequate understanding of who he is. As long as I think that I can solve my problems (with a little help from God, of course), then I am the sovereign and he is the servant. (John N. Oswalt, *The NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah*, p. 130)

18- Therefore, what is a necessary ingredient for us to love Jesus more and more?

Speak ye comfortably, to Lit. 'Speak to the heart of'. The expression is found eight times in the O.T. (Gen. 34:3; 50:21; Judg. 19:3; Ruth 2:13; II Sam. 19:7; II Chron. 30:22; Hos. 2:14, and here), in five of them of the wooing of a lover. The Hosea passage is again significant: Hosea (Hos. 2:15-20) and Jeremiah (Jer. 2:2) had pictured Israel as the bride of Yahweh. (C. R. North, *Isaiah 40-55 The Suffering Servant of God*, p. 38)

19- What can we do to increase our love for Jesus each and every day? (Galatians 3:24 gives us a hint)

20- If you find it hard to be grateful to Jesus for His comfort, love, forgiveness and grace, it could very well be that you have either forgotten or never been aware of the bill He paid for you. What can we do to become more aware of the extent of Jesus' sacrifice to pay our bill and provide for us comfort that we might otherwise be ignorant of enjoying? What did we do to incur this bill to begin with? What was the cost of our bill before God? How was it paid by Jesus?

21- What are some of your favorite Bible verses that give you comfort in your time of trial or distress? Why are these verses so helpful?

22- Finally, we may fail to see comfort because we are so demanding and have a specifically-ordered comfort. We may miss God's assigned comfort because He gives us what is best for us and not what we want. Can you think of any times in which this has happened to

you? It may be comfort you have failed to see that was given to you either by the Lord or by someone who loves you. Have you ever been blind to comfort because you were looking for something else?

Pray for one another and other needs in the group. The group's prayer needs are:

## WEEK 2:

Theme: God is calling us to prepare to meet Him

Focus: I don't know about you, but I prepare myself differently when I am meeting different people for different occasions. When I am going to the church to work and meet people who might stop by, I nearly always take a shower, comb my hair, brush my teeth and generally try to wear nice clothes. I want to be as presentable and hospitable as I possibly can so that others might be comfortable around me and feel as though I counted them as important enough to go out of my way to treat them as special by preparing myself to greet them.

Now, when I go to work with my son-in-law Fred at the Addison Lumber Co., I hardly do any of those things. Well, I might brush my teeth so I don't offend my son-in-law with bad breath; but, I don't shower (it's a saw mill. You get really dusty and dirty), I don't wear nice clothes (that would be silly - they'd be ruined) and I don't comb my hair (it just is not important there). It's a saw mill. Appearance is just not that important as it would be in my office (or even more importantly) on Sunday morning.

Now when I am scheduled to meet with Superintendent Ramundo, I do all that I can to make a good impression. Why? He holds my job and my future in his spoken word. In other words, he can, at any time, say, "Pastor Keith, I want you to move to Tenbucktwo. You will be pastor there beginning in June.

Now it really doesn't matter if I want to go or not, I am obligated to go. So there is a natural, and rightful "fear" whenever I meet with Superintendent Ramundo because he has my job and my future in his hands or in what he has to say. Therefore, I prepare myself differently when I am going to meet with him than I do when I go to see my son-in-law at the sawmill.

It is not that I love my son-in-law less. In fact, if the truth be known, I love my son-in-law a whole lot more than Superintendent Ramundo. But, I prepare myself differently because I recognize the power and authority Superintendent Ramundo has over my life and (smartly and rightfully) I want to make as good an impression on him as I possibly can so he will look favorably upon me as he determines my future.

In this text, God (through Isaiah) is encouraging us (through the voice of one calling in the desert) to prepare the way for the Lord. We will look at what that means and why we may not be meeting with God in the intensity and intimacy as we wish. It may very well be that we have not made the necessary preparations for him to meet with us.

### **Cultural Context:**

Whenever kings were going to travel to a yet unvisited area of their domain, roads were prepared for their arrival. The bumps were smoothed out, the rocks taken out and the road was basically made more tolerable for the king to travel to come and meet with his subjects. The king would not come until and unless the road was properly prepared. And with the king came blessing and support that only the king could give.

Likewise, the wilderness holds special significance to God's people and God's ways of dealing with His people. See John the Baptist as the one calling the wilderness (see below).

The “wilderness” spoken of here is in the southeast, “the Arabah.” And the one to travel on it is “YHWH...our God.” Ezekiel had pictured YHWH abandoning the city (Ezek 9-11). Now he is returning, using the way that was familiar from temple traditions of YHWH coming from Sinai or from Edom (cf. Chaps. 34 and 63:1-6) through the Arabah south of the Dead Sea to approach Jerusalem from the east (cf. *Comment* on 10:27d-32). The heart of the announcement, the reason for the messages of good news, is that YHWH is returning to take up residence in Jerusalem again. This calls for royal preparations. (John D. W. Watts, *Word Biblical Commentary Isaiah 34-66*, p. 609)

The wilderness has also been known as a place where God can test and develop His people. Please note these comments from the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* and the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*:

Perhaps the most common reference to the desert attempts to characterize the effect this land has upon man. It is a barren and terrifying place, where man does not, cannot live easily (Job 38:26; Isa. 21:1; 40:3; 41:19f.; Jer. 9:2 [MT 1]; 15:33; Mk. 8:4). It is lonely, sometimes characterized by a solitude that is threatening and frightening to man (Ps. 107:4; Prov. 21:19; Jer. 17:6; Lk. 8:29; He. 11:38). It is desolate, and is often used to symbolize the desolation that has or is to come upon Israel or her enemies (Isa. 14:17; 33:9; Jer. 4:26; 22:6; 50:12; Zeph. 2:13).

Many of these nuances are present when the references are made to the wilderness tradition associated with the Exodus-Sinai traditions and others. At least two themes within this complex can be seen when the desert is referred to. The desert is the general place where the wandering occurred, where guidance was needed (Ps. 105:41; Isa. 48:21). It is also the place where the people murmured against Yahweh (Ps. 78:17, 40; 106:14).

In addition to the ways in which “desert” is used above, another theological use in many of the passages already cited must be mentioned. The desert is used, often in metaphors or similes, to demonstrate God’s power to transform. The desert represents aridity, solitude, desolation. Sometimes God will make things like a desert, desolate and lifeless (Isa. 50:2; Jer. 4:26; 22:6; 50:12; 51:43; Zeph. 2:13). At other times the desert itself is to be transformed positively into a place of greenery and water, of life, demonstrating God’s ability to change all conditions of man and his world (Isa. 35:1, 6; 41:19; 43:19f.; 51:3). A vivid example of this latter ability to transform the desert and all it symbolizes is found in the feeding of the four thousand (Mt. 15:32-39 par. Mk. 8:1-10). There the desert represents quite clearly and explicitly a place incapable of providing food (life!) for great numbers of people. And yet, as in the OT passages cited above, God is able to make the desert a place capable of providing food and of giving life. (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: A-D*, p. 928)

To any but the true desert tribes, it must appear as a completely foreign, and exceedingly hostile environment of rock and stone. This hostility made the wilderness significant as a place where God could test His chosen, either collectively “in the day of testing in the wilderness” (cf. Pss 78; 95; 107) or individually, in an alien world where only by depending upon Him could they survive at all. At His command the wilderness could become fruitful, as Isaiah saw (chs. 32; 35; 41). (*Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible: Q-Z*, p. 931)

The wilderness is regarded both positively and negatively in the OT. Negatively, the wilderness through which Israel journeyed to Canaan was “great and terrible” (Dt. 1:19), a place of “flinty rock” and “no water” populated by “fiery serpents and scorpions” (8:15), a “howling waste” (32:10). In the wilderness Israel rebelled against Yahweh. The murmuring motif that runs through the Exodus narratives describes open rebellion, not merely disgruntlement (see Coats). Frequently complaining that God had brought them into the wilderness to die (e.g., Ex. 14:11f.), the generation that left Egypt brought upon themselves the destruction that they feared. Because of their disobedience, Yahweh condemned them to wander in the wilderness for forty years (Nu. 14:33) and to perish there. The memory of that experience was kept alive throughout Israel’s history. Both psalmist and prophet returned to that theme (e.g., Ps. 78:40; Ex. 20:13).

The wilderness experience also had its positive side. Not only was it “great and terrible”; it was where the mountain of God was located (Ex. 4:27). The desert was the route by which the Israelites escaped their bondage in Egypt; here Yahweh guided them (Dt. 1:31; Ps. 78:52), fed them (Ex. 16:32), and established his covenant with them (Ex. 19:1-6; cf. Acts 7:36, 44). Moreover, God promised through the prophets that in the future He would make the wilderness to be so well watered that forest and cultivated trees would grow there, and it would be a place where justice and righteousness would dwell (Isa. 32:15f.; 41:18f.). (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Q-Z*, p. 1062)

That *desert* is an excellent figure for the tragic condition of the people is seen in that it is waterless (41:18; 43:19, 20; 48:21), not fertile (41:19; 51:3; 55:13; 60:13), without paths (43:19), and uninhabited (64:10). (Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah Vol. 3 Chapters 40-66*, p. 29)

## Reading God’s Word:

{3}A voice of one calling:

"In the desert prepare the way for the LORD;  
make straight in the wilderness  
a highway for our God.

{4}Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
the rugged places a plain.

{5}And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
and all mankind together will see it.

For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

1- Some people feel the voice is in the desert, but I feel the message of the voice is “go to the desert to prepare the way for the Lord.” From what we observed above, what would be significant about going to the desert?

2- If you agree with my interpretation of this verse; what do you suspect is the reason why God desires for us to build this preparatory “highway” in the wilderness or desert?

3- Why does a way need to be prepared for the Lord? What is there about the path He desires to take that needs preparation? Who is in charge of the preparation? What can we do to prepare?

Every valley *shall* be lifted up, and so forth. Isaiah is not talking about literal, topographical change. He is talking about the upheaval of true repentance. He is talking about a new moral topography, a new social landscape. He is talking about the disruptive advance of salvation. He is saying that lifting and lowering and leveling and smoothing are necessary to the kingdom of Christ. He is talking about depression being relieved, pride being flattened, troubled personalities becoming placid, and difficult people becoming easy to get along with. And he is also implying that if we cling to the status quo and refuse God's upsetting but constructive salvation, we risk having no part with Christ. (Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., *Preaching the Word: Isaiah, God Saves Sinners*, p. 236)

4- Isaiah says that we are not to build or prepare a mere path, but a "highway" for our God. What would constitute a highway in regard to the way we need to prepare for the Lord's coming? In other words what kinds of special preparations would be more in keeping with a "highway" in contrast to a mere path or trail way for the Lord?

It is interesting to note that kings of the 8th & 7th centuries BC would have had rocks removed and potholes filled to prepare for their coming so they could bless the community to which they were traveling with their wisdom, resources and counsel. But this king does not simply build a bridge to go over ravines and fills potholes and remove rocks, but mountains are removed and used to fill the valleys. Bridges are not necessary because all ravines are filled in preparation for His arrival.

5- What do you think is a valley in your life that is in need of leveling for the way of the Lord to be made ready for Him to come and meet with us? What do you think is a mountain or hill in the way the Lord wants to take to come and meet with us? In other words, what sins have you allowed to obstruct the Lord's coming more significantly into your life?

What kinds of things obstruct God's way? For some, the path is blocked by fears; for others, the obstruction is pride or our illusions of our own importance, deceptive opinions of our own ability to handle things by ourselves. The path might be blocked by our mistaken anger at God—when we blame him inaccurately for not interrupting life's natural processes and consequences. (Marva J. Dawn, *To Walk and Not Faint*, p.17)

6- What can we do to help ourselves and others in our immediate faith community to prepare the way the Lord wants to take to come and meet with us?

7- What is implied as the benefit or reward of making these kinds of preparations?

8- When you consider that God is holy, judge, all-knowing, all-powerful, at all places at all times and holds your future in His hands, can you ever get prepared properly to meet with God? What do you think is the ONE THING that God wants prepared most of all?

9- This is a stupid question, but I must ask it: What assurance do we have that all this preparation is really worth all the hassle? Why is this a stupid question? Why are so few of us willing to make the necessary “way” preparations for the Lord? What does our unwillingness to prepare to meet our God have to say about our sanity, awareness or insight?

10- What can we do to encourage one another to do more to prepare the way for the Lord our God to meet with us?

In 1988, Huntington IN was preparing to welcome Presidential candidate (then Vice President) George Herbert Walker Bush (I) and his vice-presidential running mate Senator Dan Quayle.

I will never forget the preparations that the city of Huntington, IN and the counties of Allen and Huntington made to welcome and meet with our then vice-president and Senator Quayle. Every intersection of roads from the Baer Field airport in Ft. Wayne, IN to the courthouse in Huntington (well over 20 miles) had to be guarded by state policemen, county officers, or city police. The stage from which the Vice-President and his running mate would be speaking were guarded by Secret Service men, and inspected every 10-15 minutes by bomb smelling dogs. Every rooftop in the area surrounding the courthouse was occupied by FBI or Secret Service Sharpshooters. Every residence that had a window facing the courthouse was given notice that if they appeared, unauthorized in the window of their apartment during the time Vice-President Bush was on the Courthouse platform, that the Secret Service and FBI would not be responsible for their lives.

It was an amazing display of preparedness. It took nearly every law-enforcement officer in the tri-county area to make the necessary preparations.

If we are willing to go to all this trouble for a Vice-President to meet with a city impersonally, how much more should we be willing to prepare for the God of the Universe to meet with us intimately and personally in our very own hearts and minds?

11- What impact does Isaiah make when he finishes verse 5 by saying “For the mouth of the LORD has spoken”? What does he mean by this? What special significance does something from the mouth of the Lord have over what is spoken by a mere mortal; even the President of the United States?

I remember when Jean and I were living in St. Cloud FL. We were sitting in a Taco Bell and enjoying our meal while next to us a potential employee was interviewing with the manager. Well, at

least the potential employee wanted to think he was interviewing for a job. But, as we could not help but overhear, what that job seeker was actually doing instead was putting a noose around his neck and dropping the floor out from underneath himself as far as his chance of being hired was concerned.

You see, this poor, unprepared youth failed to understand what the manager was looking for and the power that the manager had in regard to his future employment. The young man presented himself in a manner and attitude that had to be offensive to any manager worth his salt. Here is how a portion of the interview went:

MANAGER: I'd like to hire you but you are only 18 and I am not allowed by law to hire anyone underage to close up at night and what I really need is someone to close up around 2 AM. I might be able to get you a few hours each week in the evening.

JOB SEEKER: O, I don't have to put my correct age on the application. I can say that I'm 21. I don't care much for rules anyway. I've always been one to push or break the rules when they don't work for me. So if you want to hire me, I'd be glad to write that I am 21 on my application. That way you can get around the legal requirement for me to be 21 to close up.

Now, I did not have a chance to question the manager after that interview. And I can only imagine what was going through the manager's mind as he heard this applicant confess that he had no regard for rules and would have no problem lying about his age on the application so he could get the job.

In my mind, the applicant had not prepared himself well at all for the job. Neither had he prepared himself by thinking about what the manager was looking for, nor had he prepared his own heart and mind to be a good employee by thinking about what makes one a person whom the manager can trust and be willing to hire; or close up at night. Certainly the manager is not looking for a person who openly confesses they have no regard for company rules, legal restrictions or that they show a willingness to lie about anything that is not in their personal, or immediate best interest.

Part of what this portion of Isaiah is saying is that if we truly want to have an opportunity for "the glory of the LORD to be revealed" we must properly prepare, not only our hearts, minds and attitudes, but even the circumstances and environment around us. To fail to do so is to seriously underestimate God's holiness, purity and His demand that we properly revere, honor and fear Him.

12- What can we do to better prepare our hearts and minds to meet with God? What often happens instead? What are we openly conveying to God when we treat Him more like our son-in-law instead of like our supervisor or Superintendent?

13- The end result of a properly prepared highway is that the glory of the Lord will be revealed. What does that mean? What is the Lord's glory? Why is that significant? How is this to be incentive for us to prepare the highway so the Lord will arrive to meet us?



A Babylonian hymn says, 'Make [Nabu's] way good, renew his road. Make straight his path', referring to the creation of special processional routes along which the images of the gods were carried on festivals. The creation of a road that is *straight* (3d), unmistakable (*highway*, or causeway, 3e), level (4ab) and smooth (4cd) pictures a journey made without difficulty and therefore with certainty of arrival. (Motyer, p. 244)

14- How does God reveal Himself to you? How can you encourage yourself and others to receive even a more extensive revelation of God in your life and in the lives of others?

We know from Luke 3:1-18 that Jesus is the coming King and that the readiness we need is newness of life. We can't hide behind denominational labels, however correct ("We have Abraham as our father," Luke 3:8). What we need is new selves. Prepare the way of the Lord. (Ortlund, p. 236)

Pray for one another and other needs in the group. The group's prayer needs are:

## WEEK 3:

Theme: God is forever - People Wither

Focus: If God is for you, who can be against You? God is all-powerful, all knowing, all-caring. Do not trust in men. Do not trust in politicians. Trust in the Lord. He is the Great Shepherd who is not only capable of caring for you, but WANTS to care for you. He loves us so much He is even willing to lie down His life to save us poor helpless sheep. Trust in Him.

In Matthew 6:28 Jesus says, “consider the lilies of the field,” and tells us to look at their beauty and glory. Even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as they are, and yet, Jesus says, they pass away. If our Father invested such care in clothing them with beauty, however, certainly we can trust him to take care of us, too.

The fact that our flesh is fleeting should do this one thing: It should drive us to total dependence upon the one who does not pass away. That is the conclusion (C. S.) Lewis reached with such a stroke of genius. If the things of the world do not ultimately satisfy, if they do not push under our deepest longings, we can come to the realization that we are indeed made for another world—and that that world has already entered our own and changed it eternally. (Dawn, p. 37)

1- Trusting God seems like it should be easy. But, in reality, we struggle with trusting God almost every day of our lives. What would be our position concerning sin, worry, discontentment, and complaining if we truly trusted God?

2- Why do we find it so easy to trust in people and not trust in God?

The Church over the last 1500 years has defined saving faith or trust as consisting of these three elements: 1- Knowledge of God and Who He is. 2- Ascension to that knowledge. In other words, when we discover knowledge about God, we come to the conclusion that God truly is good, and worthy of our trust. And finally, saving faith also consists of 3- Conviction. In other words, once, you have faith to trust in God, you actually make decisions that reflect that trust.

3- What kinds of things do we do to show we HAVE conviction and are actually trusting in Christ? On the other hand, what kinds of things do we do that show we LACK conviction no matter what we might know and what we say we ascend to about our knowledge of God?

4- Judah and Jerusalem found it easier to trust in just about anything than to trust in God. They trusted in the superpower nations at that time rather than trusting in God. They trusted in their worship of other nations’ idols rather than trusting in God. They trusted in their possessions and their status rather than trusting in God. What is there in these things that makes it easier to trust in them than God? What is it about God that makes it so difficult to trust Him? Or is it something in **US** that makes it difficult to trust in God?

## Reading God's Word:

{6}A voice says, "Cry out."

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All men are like grass,

and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.

{7}The grass withers and the flowers fall,

because the breath of the LORD blows on them.

Surely the people are grass.

{8}The grass withers and the flowers fall,

but the word of our God stands forever."

{9}You who bring good tidings to Zion,

go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem,

lift up your voice with a shout,

lift it up, do not be afraid;

say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"

{10}See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,

and his arm rules for him.

See, his reward is with him,

and his recompense accompanies him.

{11}He tends his flock like a shepherd:

He gathers the lambs in his arms

and carries them close to his heart;

he gently leads those that have young.

5- Verses 6-11 point out that all flesh is like grass. If our enemies are people, what does God say about them? What implication is God (through Isaiah) telling us about our circumstances if our problem is with other people who are like grass?

6- What about you? In what do you trust? The Bible says we are so unreliable we don't even do what is best for ourselves. Have you ever found this to be true? Should we trust in ourselves then?

7- How does the world try to disguise the fact that it is as fragile and temporary as grass? Do you ever keep this from yourself as well?

8- All of Scripture is given so that our faith might be increased (Romans 10:17). What attributes or revelations of God's character has Isaiah pointed out thus far in Isaiah 40:1-11 that would make our faith or trust in God increase?

9- Does your inability to trust God as you know you should ever force you to come to the conclusion (as suggested above) that you are in fact, an alien or stranger in this world and have been made for another world? Tell us about your discovery of this reality.

10- What do we know about man and his nature and attributes that makes him untrustworthy?

11- (vs 8) Have you ever tried to minister to someone who was really going through a difficult time and come away feeling like you have failed or felt like you have been superficial in your providing comfort? What can we give them that is much more eternal? What cautions do we need to monitor as we minister to others?

12- Verse 10 has some interesting language that describe God's nature and attributes. What do you think is being communicated here? What does it mean, "His arm rules for Him"? What does it mean "His reward is with Him"? What does it mean "his recompense accompanies Him"? Who is the object of God's actions here?

13- Isaiah also points out that God is like a gentle loving shepherd. What other scriptural references can you think of that talks about God or Jesus as being a shepherd? Why do you think God chooses to reveal Himself as Shepherd?

14- How does the Great Shepherd nurture His sheep? How can we become better sheep so we can be better nurtured by the Great Shepherd?

The shepherd is a frequent image in Biblical tradition: John 10, Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34 contain elaborate examples. On the one hand, the shepherd represents that combination of strength and tenderness just mentioned. But on the other hand, the leaders of society, and especially the king, were thought of as shepherds (*eg* 1 Kings 22:17; Jer. 23:1-4; 50:6; Ezek. 34:2), and so the good shepherd will be one who protects the vulnerable members of society from injustice and oppression, and ensures that the people live in "peace and security."

Verse 10 contains the engaging idea that God is going to be rewarded for the years of misery he has gone through while his wayward people suffered. Like Rachel weeping for her children, he will soon see his people returning to their own country—and that will be his reward (see Jer. 31:15-20). Our God is a God who weeps for us, suffers for us "like a woman in travail" (42:14) and glories in us (49:3). (John F. A. Sawyer, *The Daily Study Bible Series, Isaiah Vol. 2*, p. 45)

15- What can we do to trust the eternal God more and be less intimidated and influenced by temporary people?

God is inviting us to turn our perceptions around and see everything from his point of view. He understands that the struggle of faith is won or lost in the way we perceive reality. Yes, we are dwarfed by the creation; but the creation is dwarfed by God. See it that way. See him that way. When you feel threatened by world events and overwhelmed by your own problems, there's another way to perceive it all. God is opening up to you a prophetic vision. And the Biblical gospel is his way of calling to us, "Behold your God!" (Isaiah 40:9). (Ortlund, p. 248)

Pray for one another and other needs in the group. The group's prayer needs are:

## WEEK 4:

One cannot compare God with the creature, for between the creature and God there is an infinite distance; hence, to make such a comparison is to bring God down to the level of the creature. (Young, p. 51)

Theme: God is Awesomely Almighty

Focus: When one understands God's "otherness", the scope of His power, the breadth of His love, the extent of His mercy, the incomprehensibility of His knowledge, the reach of His forgiveness, as well as the security of His presence; one would either immediately trust and rest in Him or else cower away in fear and trembling. Isaiah is inspired to share with us the transcendence and awesomeness of God so we might realize that when He comes close to us and declares that He loves us and that He will never leave us nor forsake us; we can be assured that that is a promise in which we can trust wholeheartedly.

1- Imagine you are in the position where you have a serious and immense need (maybe you owe the IRS \$40,000.00 by tomorrow noon or they will confiscate everything you own) and someone comes up to you and says, "Is there anything I can do to help?" How would you react? Would you think they could really help? What kind of hope would you hold out for someone to write you a check for \$40,000.00? Why?

2- What if the person who said they would be willing to help you out was a billionaire and you knew he was good for writing a check for \$40,000.00 because that was his daily income? Would that change your hopes? What makes the difference in the extent of hope you have in being saved from your situation?

3- If you could create a god, one you created in your mind, what would this god be like so you could trust implicitly and without question? What kind of nature and/or attributes would this god have to possess in order for you to believe that this god would be desirous and capable of saving you from any conceivable crisis in which you might be placed?

4- Does this god exist? Read Isaiah 40:12-17 and be prepared to share what you feel God (as revealed in Isaiah 40) lacks in order for Him to earn your complete trust and faith.

### Reading God's Word:

{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 on the scales and the hills in a balance?

{13}Who has understood the mind of the LORD,  
or instructed him as his counselor?

{14}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?

{15}Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket;  
they are regarded as dust on the scales;  
he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust.

{16}Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires,  
nor its animals enough for burnt offerings.

{17}Before him all the nations are as nothing;  
they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.

‘Look at this’, says the prophet: a person carries a bucket of water from the well and a drop splashes out! Does he notice the loss? A chemist measures out a substance; total accuracy is important, so he wipes or blows the dust off the pan of his scales. (Motyer, p. 247)

The particular value of the doctrine of God the Creator is, of course, that it brings all that is true about God to bear on this world. Consider, then, the absurdity of losing faith in One who, in relation to earth, is all-powerful (12), all-wise (13-14), dominant (15-17), with no god to challenge, check or rival him (18-20), King of kings (21-24), sovereignly in charge of his world down to the smallest detail so that everything is in its place, nothing overlooked, nothing lost! (Motyer, p. 250)

5- What word pictures or images given here in Isaiah 40:12-17 really impressed you? Why? Are you able to even communicate the kind of vision or understanding you have when you hear these word pictures about God?

6- With the kinds of word pictures Isaiah is presenting here to get you to try and comprehend the awesomeness, the immensity and the All-mightiness of God, do they impress you? How well are you able to grasp these pictures of God’s awesomeness and might? Why do you think God through Isaiah chose to use such unimaginable pictures of God’s might, power and authority?

Misner commented on Albert Einstein’s view of Christian preaching:

[The design of the universe is] very magnificent and shouldn’t be taken for granted. In fact, I believe that is why Einstein had so little use for organized religion . . .He must have looked at what the preachers said about God and felt that they were blaspheming. He had seen much more majesty than they had ever imagined, and they were just not talking about the real thing. (Daniel J. Kevles, “The Final Secret of the Universe?” *The New York Review of Books*, May 16, 1991)

7- Why did Misner say he believed Einstein had so little use for organized religion? Have you ever felt like pastors were blaspheming God when you compare the god of their sermons with the God you discover in Isaiah 40? Explain if you are able.

O awful, awful name of God! Light unbearable! Mystery unfathomable! Vastness immeasurable! Who are these who come forward to explain the mystery, and gaze unblinking into the depths of the light, and measure the immeasurable vastness to a hair? O name, that God's people of old did fear to utter! O light, that God's prophet would have perished had he seen! Who are these that are now so familiar with it? (*The Paris Sketch Book, "Madame Sand and the New Apocalypse"*)

8- What makes these word pictures almost as hard to trust and believe as God Himself? Why is that true? What is there in us that resists or even rejects these kinds of images?

But fortunately for us, the Bible does not stop at a mere assertion but goes on to analyze the causes of this lack of belief and explains to us why the gospel seems at first sight to be so incredible. And it tells us that the first cause of our failure to believe the biblical message, the message of the Christian gospel, is that we do not appreciate the truth concerning the being and the character of God. It is this failure that accounts, ultimately, for all our other troubles. We will persist in thinking of

God as one of ourselves, as but a man, and we look at his actions as if they were the actions of a human being. We always start with ourselves, with our measures, with our judgments and assessments; and our most fatal error is that even when we come face to face with God, we bring all these measurements with us. Then, because God does not fit into our categories, we say we cannot believe and we reject the message of the gospel. (Lloyd-Jones, pp. 80-81)

9- Reading Isaiah 40:12-17 might allow you to think that God could be an All-powerful cosmic bully who has all this might and ability but does not choose to direct it towards anything good, helpful or loving. But, when you read ALL of Isaiah 40, you get an entirely different picture. Understanding that God is all powerful and yet thoroughly compassionate, loving, kind, patient and gracious, what prevents you from trusting God with your WHOLE heart and mind? Why?

10- Remember, if you trusted God completely, you would never worry again, you would see every day as a brand new adventure that God is allowing you to go on for you to become all that He created you to be. You would never again sin because you would know that following God's Laws would ALWAYS mean the best for you. Realizing this is the life of one who fully trusts in God, how are you doing? What is keeping you from fully trusting in God? Try real hard to be honest. I know it is hard, but try!



11- As mentioned earlier, Isaiah is trying to get us to see the Holiness or the “otherness” of God. What does Isaiah say that tells us that God is nothing like anything or anyone we have ever experienced or encountered? Do we trust what Isaiah is saying? If so then what are verses 13 & 14 telling us? What do those verses say to us when we begin to question God by asking questions like “Why did this have to happen?” or “What is this all about?” or “What is God trying to do to me?” or “When will this all end?”

12- In verses 15-17, why do you think that Isaiah, over and over again, conveys that nations are nothing compared to God? And if nations are as nothing, what does that make us as individuals? In other words if the entirety of the United States, all 280 million of us, are as nothing before God, how do we stack up to God as an individual? Does Isaiah suggest that we are not worth anything to God? What makes you confident this CANNOT be the correct message these verses are trying to communicate?

God’s distance from humankind is accented here. From that distance humans appear as insignificant “grasshoppers.” To One who is “stretching out heavens,” individual persons, be they “princes” or “judges,” have no inherent power or relevance. He can make or break them, can establish them in power or determine the “extinction” of them and all their apparent influence and power, and can make them in every sense “non-entities.” Nothing in human existence is as fragile as power. God can take it away in an instant. The same words used in v 17 (“nothing,” and “unreality”) occur again here. Like the unreality of idols is the unreality of perceived political power in comparison to God’s reality and God’s existence. (Watts, p. 624)

13- Have you ever tried to tell the Lord what to do? In light of Isaiah 40:12-17, how silly is that? Why is it pretty silly to try and counsel or ask to be an advisor to God?

14- What will it take for us to learn to trust God more? What more could God possibly do, or what self-improvement plan could God engage in to improve His ability to win or earn our trust and faith?

It is our totally inadequate idea of God, our unworthy conception of him, that accounts for all our troubles and problems, all our difficulties about believing this Christian message.

We do not understand it. That is the trouble. God is so great and so different that we stumble at every turn. We think we understand, we think we are competent to do so, and we bring our questions and we analyse them with our minds, and because God does not conform to what we think, we say, ‘This teaching about God is wrong. It can’t be true.’ I say again that all our problems are because of our tragic inability to understand the character of God. (Lloyd-Jones, p. 131)

15- What can I do to assist myself and others to find their security in God and not in the United States or any other person, nation or group of persons?

My husband taught me that in a humorous way. Once in the playfulness of asking “Why do you love me?” I expected him to answer (or hoped he would) with some rapturous exclamation about my gifts or personality or charm. Instead he simply said, “Because you need it.” (Dawn, pp. 97-98)

In the context of the series of rhetorical questions in Isaiah 40 challenging the believer to behold the power and might of God, we can't help but fall humbly to our knees in recognition that we can't even begin to offer anything that is worthy to praise God's imperial name. Only in the confession of our feebleness, only in the realization of the destitution of our sacrifices, can we come humbly into the presence of the omnipotent God and know our proper place before him. (Dawn, p.100)

16- Were there any differences between the ideal god of your imagination and the real God as revealed in the Bible? After thinking about it, consider what flaws you may have in your imaginary god that you are glad doesn't exist in the real god. For, as the greatest minds over the last 2000 years have expressed, there is nothing better we could possibly imagine than the REAL God as He truly exists.

17- If God is not the problem with our trusting in Him, who is? So what can WE do to learn to trust God more? NIKE!

We are more ready to believe in the theories and suppositions of scientists than we are to believe from the evidence of creation that the ultimate mind of God is behind it all. And it is our ignorance that makes us do it. If only we understood the heavens and the earth, we would see the handiwork of God - but sin has blinded us. We are ignorant. The 'god of this world' has blinded our minds (2 Cor. 4:4). (Lloyd-Jones, p. 122)

Pray for one another and other needs in the group. The group's prayer needs are:

## WEEK 5:

Theme: God is unimaginably incomparable

Focus: When we begin to try and understand or comprehend God, we must learn first to wave the white flag and then proceed. For, if one does not admit his inability to comprehend God at the beginning, he will more than likely try to shove God into his “box” and therefore pervert and twist the real God to fit into the box only an imaginary god could fit in.

God has chosen to reveal Himself in the Scriptures and especially in this 40th chapter of Isaiah. And we discover in Isaiah that God is holy, holy, holy. He is beyond our understanding. He is beyond human categories. In fact, we can (as Einstein suggests) actually blaspheme God and His holiness by attempting to describe or explain God in our own limited categories while ignoring the Biblical revelation in which God has chosen to reveal Himself.

Finally, we must be careful and not confuse our inability to comprehend God with unbelief. Much of what passes today as unbelief is really an inability to comprehend the God of the universe. Join the club. There is no one that is able to know completely the mind of God; not Moses, not David, not Paul, no one! Do not be discouraged because some of what the Bible says doesn’t make sense. There is much about God that is humanly very, very difficult to understand. But, that does not mean that we struggle with belief just because we have a lack of understanding. In fact, I would like to suggest (and the Bible — especially Hebrews 11 — confirms) that the most God-honoring faith is one that believes and trusts God in the midst of a less than full understanding of what is going on or what is taking place.

Much like a child trusts his parents even though the child does not have a clue as to what is really going on in the world around him. And, again, great parents, if they are holy parents (different or separated from the rest of the world because they are loving, kind, caring, sacrificial and faithful) are likely to appear different or weird, or uncool in the eyes of the world and thus our unbelieving culture makes it more difficult for their child to trust in them because they are so different than the norm. How much more a perfectly holy and “other” God may be mocked as being hard to trust simply because His nature and attributes are so . . . other. No wonder the world thinks Christians are weird, backwards, stupid or ignorant. We serve and submit to a God who is nothing like anyone or anything else in the entire universe. In the vernacular, because we are willing to submit and follow such a strange God, we are freaks!

1- Have you ever had an experience that words just seemed to fail you when you tried to communicate that experience to another? When was that experience? What were you trying to say but had difficulty saying? Have you since found the words to describe that experience?

2- There are some experiences that are “holy.” They are so “other,” so separated from the rest of the world, that they lack human categories by which to describe or communicate to another the experience you enjoyed or had. Can you think of some “holy” (totally “other”) experiences that might qualify here?

3- The Bible tells us that God is transcendent. What does that mean? The Bible also tells us that God is immanent. What does that mean? How can they both be true at the same time?

4- The words “incomparable” and “unimaginable” are used in our theme to describe God. Do you think these words should apply to God? Why or why not? What does Isaiah have to say in Isaiah 40:18-26 that would confirm this?

Is there anything apart from God with which He may be compared? The answer is, “There is not.” At the same time it should be noted that the question is *unto whom* and not *unto what will ye liken God?* Perhaps the thought is that there is no human creature to whom God may be likened. No man, be he ever so powerful and exalted, can be compared with God. If all the nations before Him are but as a drop of the bucket, how much less can He be compared with any mere man! It is significant that Isaiah uses the designation *‘el (God)*, which always points to God in distinction from the creature.

Isaiah’s question brings us to the heart of genuine theism. There can be no comparison between the living, eternal God (*‘el*) and any man, for man is but a creature. Man is limited, finite, temporal; God is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in all His attributes and perfections. In our thinking about God the infinite distance between God and the creature must ever be kept in mind. To break down this distinction is to fall into the sin of idolatry. (Young, p. 51)

But this is another example of the danger of forcing the biblical data into our logical boxes. As with sovereignty and human freedom, both the absolute otherness of God *and* his ability to be present with his creation are taught by the Bible, and if we diminish either in an attempt to make them conform to our logical limitations, we have done damage to the full revelation. For instance, if God is not transcendent, then he lacks the power to change our circumstances. But more importantly, we also have lost any reason to change those circumstances because they are simply part of the ineluctable consequences of being caught on the wheel of existence that has neither beginning nor end. But if God is only transcendent, then he neither knows nor cares what is happening in our lives. He is simply other than we, bringing us into existence and providing the energy that powers the cosmos, but he remains untouched by the changing, fluctuating movements of the world.

The Bible insists that *both* propositions are equally true. On one account, God “sits above the circle of the earth” (40:22). He is not the sun, moon, or stars, nor is he to be identified with any process of earth, whether physical, political, or psychological. He is above and beyond all of that. But at the same time, he *is* love. (Oswalt, p. 449)

### Reading God’s Word:

{18}To whom, then, will you compare God?

What image will you compare him to?

{19}As for an idol, a craftsman casts it,

and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it.  
{20}A man too poor to present such an offering  
selects wood that will not rot.  
He looks for a skilled craftsman  
to set up an idol that will not topple.

{21}Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
Have you not understood since the earth was founded?

{22}He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,  
and its people are like grasshoppers.  
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,  
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.

{23}He brings princes to naught  
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

{24}No sooner are they planted,  
no sooner are they sown,  
no sooner do they take root in the ground,  
than he blows on them and they wither,  
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

{25}"To whom will you compare me?  
Or who is my equal?" says the Holy One.

{26}Lift your eyes and look to the heavens:  
Who created all these?  
He who brings out the starry host one by one,  
and calls them each by name.  
Because of his great power and mighty strength,  
not one of them is missing.

5- Verses 18-20 talk about idols. What is an idol? What did they represent or what were they supposed to do for the owner in Isaiah's time? Do we have modern day idols? If so what are some? What do we expect from our idols?

6- Do you have gold overlays on your idols that keep you from seeing of what they really consist? What gold overlays do you put on your idols to keep you from recognizing them for what they really are? Why is it we tend to keep the reality of what makes up our idols from ourselves?

7- Why is it silly to compare God to an idol? What are the major differences (that Isaiah states in 21-26) between God and anything or anyone else . . . especially idols?

8- What do you think verse 20 means? There are a number of credible commentators who suggest that the poor man here in verse 20, has become such because he has invested nearly all that he owns in his idols and thus, has driven himself to poverty. Have you ever known anyone who impoverished themselves “worshiping” their idols?

9- Read Matthew 6:21. Do you think that Jesus’ statement from Matthew 6:21 has anything to contribute to this discussion?

10- Isaiah 40:21-22 seem to suggest that the superiority of God is to be understood by EVERYONE! What is it that Isaiah understood that many in 21st Century America seem to have lost track of? (See Romans 1:18-25 for the Apostle Paul’s similar argument)

11- How can we learn about God and what He is like from Isaiah 40:18-26? How do we discover what God is like? Is it what we think or what is revealed? Which is to be trusted? Why? Where do we get revelation?

“To whom would you [pl.] liken God?” (Repeated in v25 and in 46:5). Human beings think in analogies. We seek comparables within our experience to deal with something outside of our experience. The Bible does this in speaking of God in human terms (anthropomorphism). The fault lies in assuming that one has comprehended, has “gauged” the mind and spirit of God, so that one is in the position to make recommendations to the Deity or correct him is idolatry as surely as is the building of an image. (Watts, pp. 622-23)

12- How might I be able to grow and cultivate my ability to understand what God reveals to me?

13- Verses 23 & 24 seem to suggest another aspect of the superiority of God that should be understood by EVERYONE! But it is not. What does Isaiah say here that many 21st century Americans do not understand? (See Acts 17:24-28 for the Apostle Paul’s similar argument)

14- What have you seen in your own lifetime that assures you that vss. 23 & 24 are true?

15- How can you assure yourself that the things you invest in will be strong, secure and deeply rooted in times of trouble and not blown away like chaff or stubble?

16- What other aspect does Isaiah wish to communicate about God in vss. 25 & 26? Why is this ability of God so unique? What insight do verses from Jesus like Matthew 6:25-34; 10:29-

30 and Luke 12:7 give us concerning God's love and care for us?

17- Why is this kind of personalized attention and love so incredible in light of God's power and majesty? What happens to people as they become more powerful and important in the eyes of the world? Do they tend to become more or less personal in their relationships?

18- What can I do to bring God's personalized care into the world? How can I assist the church to do the same?

19- How can we guard against trying to make God "too human" in our understanding?

20- Please be aware, that there are many theologians (some inside the FM Church) who embrace the position that Isaiah is warning against. They promote that the reality of God's attributes and nature can only be as extensive as the limits of our human rationality. In other words, if we cannot think it, or if we cannot understand something the Bible says about God, then we must reject it and come to a different understanding of the Biblical revelation of God. Their limit of God's nature and attributes is their own human rational capabilities. How can we begin to recognize this heresy? What can we do when we are faced with it? Why is it so deadly?

In men's intercourse with God they are impelled to form images of him. There is nothing wrong in such image making; but an unworthy or inadequate mental image is tragic, because it thwarts God's desired fellowship with his children. Revelation is his effort to convey a correct impression of himself. The folly is in resting in man-made conceptions of God, instead of responding to his own disclosure of himself. It is not for us to devise a likeness, but to accept his own self-portrait. The prophet's question found its answer centuries later when, out of the

church's experience of Christ, an apostle called him "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), and another heard him saying, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). (Abingdon Press, *The Interpreter's Bible*, pp. 439-440)

21- On the other hand, what is likely to be the result of our worship, adoration, and/or love of a God who is far beyond our comprehension?

So what does holiness mean? It means unutterable righteousness. It means that God is truth, that God is light, and that everything God does is controlled by truth and by right and by justice. That is God. Therefore it follows of necessity that the moment you and I try to consider and to understand anything that God does in this

world, we must always start with this category of holiness. Everything he does partakes of that character and quality. Though, as a Christian, you may not understand many things, you must say that God is light and that whatever God does is right.

Our difficulty, then, is this: if that is God, we find ourselves in trouble because we are altogether different. Instead of starting with truth, we start with happiness, do we not? The characteristic that governs our thinking is selfishness, self-centeredness. We are not out for holiness—for absolute truth and righteousness and justice. What we want is ease and comfort. We want certain things so that we can enjoy ourselves. We see everything from the angle of our happiness and peace. All our decisions are governed by self-interest. So a clash is inevitable. There is God in his holiness; here are we in our sin and unworthiness. And because God does everything from the standpoint of holiness, we do not understand and we do not like it. (Lloyd-Jones, p. 134)

22- How do we begin to love the Lord our God with all our mind if our mind cannot comprehend God? Does Isaiah 55:6-11 help you here?

23- Spend some time reflecting on the “otherness” or the things that are incomprehensible to you about God. Try your best to find words to communicate to others in your group just how Amazing God is to you and why.

Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilized peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. (A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 11)

24- I would like to suggest that real worship begins where human understanding and comprehension ends. It is when we begin to understand the incomprehensibility of God or when our imagination fails us that we magnify the Lord and see Him as bigger and more powerful in our eyes. I believe, He actually becomes BIG enough to merit our praise, our adoration and our worship when we recognize Him as beyond human understanding or explanation. It is not easy to “force” our worship towards an equal. It is natural to worship a superior. And how much more superior can one be than He that is beyond our categories of understanding and comprehension. So where others see God as incomprehensible as a worship liability, we believe Isaiah (and much of the rest of the Bible) would say that it is necessary for true worship. What do you think?

Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a tribute far too small.  
Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!  
(*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* by Isaac Watts)

Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made,  
Were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade,  
To write the love of God above, would drain the oceans dry,



Nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky.  
(*The Love of God* by Frederick M. Lehman)

25- What can you do to facilitate and encourage your worship of God?

These people needed to hear the Word of God in ways that changed how they thought. That is what we need too. We need lives of faith that are shaped by the Word of God, its view of reality, and the principles that emerge from it. If I cannot “believe” God and “hope” in him in the sense of surrendering my life to him in a kind of life that I know pleases him, then his power cannot transform me. But if I will actively believe his Word, there really are no limits to what he can do for me, for my family, and for my society. (Oswalt, p. 455)

The Bible says we can magnify the Lord (KJV only—NIV “glorify”):

Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together. - Psalm 34:3

I will praise God's name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving. - Psalm 69:30

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me-- holy is his name. - Luke 1:46-49

26- What does it mean to magnify the Lord? How can we do this? Can we magnify God bigger in our minds than He actually is?

**Great views of God are essential to call forth great hopes and great energies.**  
(*The Interpreter's Bible*, p. 444)

Pray for one another and other needs in the group. The group's prayer needs are:

## WEEK 6:

Theme: God is Immanuel

Focus: You may think that God is not aware of your problem or situation. You may think that God has no clue where you are or what you are going through. You may think the Lord is too busy to see your need and to help you. But God knows all, God has power to help all, God has knowledge to lead and guide all and if we hope in the Lord, He will give us the strength . . . “to soar on wings of eagles, run and not be weary and walk and not be faint”. In other words, God empowers us to make it . . . to keep on truckin . . . to persevere. Praise be to God!

1- Have you ever counted on another person (friend, parent, child or neighbor) to help you out and they were unable to either because they lacked time, money, commitment, concern or resources? If you can, please share how that made you feel to be told they could not help you in your time of need. (Please use discretion in sharing your thoughts)

2- We must never think that God is unable to assist us. What other possibilities could explain why we have not received the help we expected from God when we asked Him for help?

3- What does it require for us to hang in there and continue to trust God when it appears that God is not going to assist us as we desired when we asked for help? What can we do to help us to trust God more in these kinds of circumstances?

### Reading God's Word:

{27}Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and complain, O Israel,  
"My way is hidden from the LORD;  
my cause is disregarded by my God"?

{28}Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,  
and his understanding no one can fathom.

{29}He gives strength to the weary  
and increases the power of the weak.

{30}Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;

{31}but those who hope in the LORD  
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;

they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.

4- In verse 27, Israel seems to first be saying that she can get away with sin because God is not aware of what is going on. And then, it seems she turns around and is complaining that God is not aware of her needs. Doesn't this seem inconsistent? To first be almost gloating that God is not aware of your sin and then to turn around and complain that God is not aware of your need? Have you ever been inconsistent in your thinking? Share your thoughts of why this happens to us.

Together these two lines could be interpreted either in the sense of Jacobean deceptiveness (the meaning of that name and the actions of that patriarch) or in the sense of the typical Israelite complaining. In the first sense, the descendants of Jacob would be exulting, "God doesn't see our misbehavior. We don't have to worry because we can escape the sentence we deserve." In the second sense, they would be mourning, "God just doesn't see our lot; our rights are being disregarded by our God."

Both interpretations fit in with the prophet's pointed question, "Why do you say [this], O Jacob, and speak [in this way], O Israel?" Both cunning and complaint contradict the attitudes of people who know and love their God. Both interpretations offer us significant lessons concerning our attitudes about God's relationship with us and his action in our lives. (Dawn, p.161)

5- In response to the charge that God does not see what is happening, God (through the prophet Isaiah) says to Israel, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom." Why do you think that God responded in this way to Israel's charge?

6- How can we avoid thinking that God doesn't see us when we sin, or thinking that He is unaware of our need?

7- What is there about God being everlasting that would have offered comfort to Israel? What is there about God as "the Creator of the ends of the earth" that would have comforted Israel?

8- What does Isaiah's description that God ". . . will not grow weary or tired, and his understanding no one can fathom" do to comfort the people of Israel?

9- The Lord ". . . gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak." Is this to everyone? Is this kind of assistance qualified? Do you know how?

10- What does Jesus have to say about weakness, suffering and trials in Matthew 5:3-13? What does the Apostle Paul have to say about this in 2 Corinthians 12:10 as well as the Apostle James in James 1:1-4?

What is stunning about verse 29 is the realization that we never do really begin to discover the power of God until we learn our own weaknesses. (Dawn, p.174)

11- Do you get the impression from these verses that suffering is to be embraced by the Christian instead of resisted? How is this attitude different than our natural inclinations and from the world?

12- When God gives strength to us, what does it look like? How does it come? What does it enable us to do? What should we look for when we look to the Lord for strength?

If the focus of Christianity were our sins, our future would shut down. But in fact Christianity is all about the saving grace of God. He overrules our stupidity with his own absolute pardon through the finished work of Christ on the cross.

Do we sin? Yes. Do we suffer for it? Yes. Is that where God leaves us? No. When his discipline has done its good work, God comes back to us with overflowing comfort. See in God not a frown but a smile, not distance but nearness. Even when we don't act like the people of God, he still identifies with us: "...my people...your God." He still calls us "Jerusalem," even when we're far away in exile. (Ortlund, p. 235)

13- Do you think that it is mandatory that one be weak or attempt the impossible for God to offer the assistance promised? Why or why not?

14- What do you think Isaiah is saying in verse 30? What difference would that make in the message to the people of Israel?

15- Why do you think God (through the prophet Isaiah) talks about the Lord renewing their strength in the order they do (soar, run, walk)?

At the Free Methodist World Ministry Center class on Isaiah this past January, we heard a parable about eagles and their ability to soar that brought great comfort to all of us:

It seems that eagles have a natural antagonist in crows. When the crows see an eagle in their territory, they will (in flight) pick at it and poke at it with their beaks and, basically, hassle it until the eagle leaves. Even though the eagle is superior in strength and size, the crows with their superior flying ability remain a pest to the eagle.

But, the eagles have one superior advantage over the crows that allow them to be able to cover the same territory and search the same area and not be hassled by the pesky crows. The eagle can fly to a height of over 10,000 feet (an altitude of which the crow is not able to sustain because of the thin air) and conduct his search for food and remain unhassled by the crows of his life.

Could this be what God through the prophet Isaiah was referring when he states in verse 31, "They will soar on wings like eagles"? They will be able to live above their menacing antagonists the crow.

16- What does it mean to you to know that God allows you to live and fly above your hassles?

17- Chapter 40 begins with God desiring to let Israel know that He is a comfort. Chapter 40 ends with God desiring to let Israel know that He is a God of comfort. How does the rest of the chapter figure in building trust and faith in God that He truly is able to comfort the people of Israel?

Here we come back to the theme of trust. This concept of trust as waiting has appeared three times previously in the book (8:17; 25:9; 33:2) and will appear twice more (49:23; 64:4). To "wait" on God is not simply to mark time; rather, it is to live in confident expectation of his action on our behalf. (Oswalt, p. 448)

18- Israel is asked to "wait on" (KJV only-NIV "hope in") the Lord. Where else have you heard this command? Why does the Lord want us to wait? What obstacles or "uneven highways" do you have in your life that make it hard for you to wait on the Lord?

This waiting upon God is often a prerequisite to receiving his blessing, for in the act of waiting we confess our own helplessness and our complete dependence upon him. (John N. Oswalt, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Isaiah 1-39*, p. 236)

It is important here to note the synonymous relation between "wait" and "trust" (8:17) in this book and elsewhere in the Old Testament. True trust always involves an element of waiting. It means believing in results that we cannot see. A determination to have the results I want now is a major sign of an inability to trust. (Oswalt, p. 152)

To wait for the Lord means to live in confident, eager suspense. It means to live with the tension of promises revealed but not yet fulfilled. This waiting is not killing time. It isn't sitting around, drumming your fingers. It is waiting on tip-toe, waiting with eager longing. It is forgetting what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead, and pressing on toward the goal (Philippians 3:13, 14). It isn't erratic bursts of hyperactivity within a general pattern of boredom. It is steady, rugged progress, sustained by the conviction that the display of God's glory in Christ is *yours*. (Ortlund, p. 254)

19- Assuming you understand what this chapter is all about, what does Isaiah 40 do to instill faith and trust in the Lord? What other side benefits come along with your understanding of this chapter?

The theological counterpart to the incomparable greatness of God is the fragility and puny insignificance of human power or even life. Isa 40:24 asserts this again. Someone had responded to YHWH's challenge in 40:6-7 by the excuse "all flesh is grass." Isa 40:24 agrees that in comparison to God's power, knowledge, and wisdom everything human is unreliable and passing. The point has already been made in 2:17 that human arrogance must be humbled. But another path is offered to "those waiting on YHWH." For he who does not "grow faint" or "be weary" gives "power to the faint" (40:28-31). There is a way between arrogance (2:17) and a cynical acceptance of weakness (40:6-7). It is called faith (7:4), waiting on YHWH (40:31). (Watts, p. 628)

20- What can you do to prepare your hearts and minds to experience Easter to the fullest this year? What can you do to build trust in the Lord? What has he done to cause you to distrust Him? What is keeping you from full surrender and Shalom?

**Great views of God are essential to call forth great hopes and great energies.**  
(*The Interpreter's Bible*, p. 444)

Pray for one another and other needs in the group. The group's prayer needs are:

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