

Introduction to Spiritual Formation

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

Date: 30 January 2013

Preacher: Don Coleman

[0:00] Okay, now, we're going to look at just an exposition of Isaiah 40, 12-31.

I think some of this material I've shared with you before, so this may be some of a repeat, but I've included that in here in our study, this study that I'm calling Spiritual Formation.

I've included it here because this, I think, is part of what Spurgeon is talking about, enlarging our intellect. But not just the intellect, but this particular passage in Isaiah 40 really grips us emotionally as well.

So, when we, as the prophet leads us, when we consider the greatness of our God, it then is the foundation for a very meaningful, very effective spiritual formation in our lives.

So, Isaiah 40, verses 12-31, the greatness of our God. Two, kind of two points we can identify in this particular passage.

[1:25] I'm not going to read the whole passage to begin with. We're going to read parts of it along the way, and I've included those parts in your notes. So, you can either follow along there if you want to, or if you can in your Bibles, if you would prefer to do that.

We're not going to be looking at every part of Isaiah 40, but the significant parts that really point us to and highlight the greatness, the greatness of God.

The first point of the two points of this you have there, God is great beyond human understanding. And we think we know a whole lot.

And not just those of us in this room, but, I mean, you know, we think we know a lot. And we're quite enlightened, and we've done a little study, and if we haven't studied, we've heard a great deal about things, about the creation and so forth.

And so we, you know, to a certain level, pretty astute, you know, in our understanding of things. But then, also, there are the scientists of our day, scientists and the, quote, experts that, you know, know a great deal more than we do about things, about science.

[2:42] Now, they've gone way beyond knowledge, and now they operate really according to a certain kind of faith. And it's not faith in the one through God or faith in the Word of God.

It's faith in their own theories, a biased theory based upon a rejection of God. And so science has gone way beyond that.

But still, there are some things they do know. And so I want to take what Isaiah 40 says and put it with some science or some things that we think we know.

And when we compare the two, we're going to understand, I think, acknowledge the fact that God is beyond, way beyond any human comprehension, any human intellect or understanding about things.

And so verse 12 is the first example of it. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand? And he's speaking about God. I mean, this is a reference to God.

[3:45] Now, not who has, you know, even though it's put in the form of a question, it's a rhetorical question. It's speaking of God.

God is the one who has measured all the waters of the earth in the hollow of his hand. Who else has been able to do that? So you see, the point is, God is beyond any human comprehension. I mean, just to even consider that someone could measure all the water of the earth in the hollow of his hand. Now, before I go any further, let's make sure we understand that these are speaking metaphorically about God.

We don't think, we're not necessarily think of God as having actual hands that are big enough to put all the waters of the earth in. It's a metaphor.

It's used to highlight the greatness of God. That's what we ought to see. But when we look at the metaphor or the analogy, then that further heightens our understanding of the greatness of God.

[4:56] And I gave you a few facts there. A little more than, and you know this fact, a little more than two-thirds of the surface of our planet is covered with water. Two-thirds.

That means it's mostly water, at least on the surface. That's a lot of water. In some places, the water on our planet is six miles deep. Can you imagine the volume of water that is on the face of the earth?

According to the best estimate, the world's oceans combined equal 321 million cubic miles of water. Now, that's not a measurement that I can understand or comprehend, you know.

What's 321 million cubic miles of water? I'll tell you what it is. It's a whole lot of water. A whole lot of water.

Yeah. Do you happen to know how much water you could hold in the palm of your hand? If you looked at the notes, you know. Approximately a tablespoon. Now, some more, some less.

[6:03] All right. Maybe some of you could hold more than that. Depends on the shape of your hand and the size of your hand. But, all right. So, you can hold a tablespoon and a half. All right.

Big deal. Still, you know, the idea of one hand, by the way. The scripture is speaking of one hand. It's singular, not plural.

But, even if we were talking about plural. All right. Let's say we'll give, we'll let you hold the water in both hands. All right. Two tablespoons. All right. Maybe three at the most. Big deal.

So, that's not a lot of water. Now, how long would it take for you, then, to measure all the waters of the earth? Just give up trying. It's not cooking. Even if I had any inclination to do such a thing.

You know, I couldn't do it in my lifetime, of course. And, I'm thinking, all right, I'm going to try it.

What am I going to do with the water after I've measured it? You know. It's just going to run right back in and I'll just be measuring the same tablespoon at a time.

[7:05] You know. And, that's not to even mention how much water is up in the atmosphere at any given time. As well. Even as we speak. And, we got a lot of it that came down the other day.

And, we'd like to have some more. But, the whole idea here is how unfathomable our God is. Who can measure the water in the palm of his hand.

And, again, singular. All the water in the palm of one hand. All right. Now, again, we're not to picture that God has a hand in that sense. But, in a metaphorical sense.

And, so, let's get a grip on what this is saying to us. That God is great beyond any comprehension. What else does Isaiah say?

He says, Who has measured heaven with a span? Another translation. Maybe a better one. I'm not sure. I didn't jot it down. It might be the ESV. Who has, with the breadth of his hand, marked off the heavens.

[8:13] Marked them off. Now, a hand breadth is the distance between the tip of the little finger and the tip of the thumb. There's a hand breadth.

And, you know, when they're completely spread apart. Now, imagine measuring anything that way. Now, you know, I could measure myself that way. Or, my son.

It would take me less time to measure myself than it would measure my son with a hand breadth.

And, every day, it would take more to measure him. But, you know, that would be a measure.

For most people, that would be nine inches, approximately. I didn't measure mine. But, actually, I think I did. If I recall. I think it was a little less than nine. Now, some might have more.

You know, Chris is a pretty long-limbed kind of fella. But, put your hand out there. Let's see. Yeah. I don't know. It might be about 12 inches. No. No. Now, Jonathan's a piano player.

[9:09] And, a lot of pianists have quite a reach, you know, there. Can you get a whole octave? Yeah. Yeah. Or more. Way more. So.

Yeah, that would be a key's not quite an inch. So, that's more than eight inches. All right. So, magic. Can you imagine, then, measuring this vast universe with a hand breadth?

Well, of course not. You can't imagine that. We tend, obviously, to, and we do, measure things by various types of measurements.

If I were to measure the height of a person, I'd use feet. Probably not my hand breadth. But, we measure in terms of feet. I'm six feet and shrinking. I think.

We all are, I guess. But, we measure a road trip by what? Miles. All right. We're going to travel so many miles. It always throws me when I travel to another country, and I'll ask the stupid question, how far is that town?

[10:18] You know, they'll say, oh, so many kilometers. I say, well, what is that? Well, that really helps. Or, like I did this last week.

What's the temperature today? And, yeah. And, they'll say it's about, let's see, in Celsius. I forgot now what they said.

But, it's much different than Fahrenheit. In fact, they asked me how cold it was in Oklahoma, and I said, well, when I left, it was, you know, in the 30s.

And, they didn't quite, in the 30s. You know, they're thinking Celsius, and I'm talking Fahrenheit. So, I say, you know, around zero.

Anyway, so, we use those kind of measurements. We have inches. We have miles, feet. We measure, scientists measure the distance within our solar system.

[11:17] They use astronomical units. 93 million miles. That's an astronomical unit. I don't know how they came up with that.

But, you know, they're smarter than I am. And so, when the scientist starts measuring outside the solar system, you've got to go to some other measurement in order to make it manageable. And, they use light years.

You know, that's a pretty big measurement. I mean, I've got it for you there. 5.88 trillion miles.

That's one light year. 5.88 trillion miles. Can you comprehend even a trillion miles?

I can't comprehend a billion miles. I get a little bit, it gets a little incomprehensible to drive to my parents over in Arkansas. You know, that many miles.

I traveled this last week going and coming, they say, 17,000 miles. You know, by airplane, of course. So, you know, here are these measures.

[12:19] All right, now, I've given you some facts there. Take, for example, our galaxy, the Milky Way. It is so huge that our solar system really is just a speck.

And it's 30,000 light years from the center of our galaxy. How much is a light year? 5.88 trillion. And we're talking about our solar system being 30,000 of those from the center of our solar system.

We think we're right in the middle of it. We're not. We're off center. About 30,000 light years. The Hubble Space Telescope, they say, focused on a small section, kind of like a pie, a sliver of a pie. And it would be a real sliver. Of our universe. One 25th of one degree of space. Whatever that is. But it's a slice of a pie. And they found 2,000 galaxies.

2,000 of them. Remember, our solar system is located in one galaxy. And I don't, I did look it up, but I don't know how big our galaxy is.

[13:31] But it must be awfully big. We're 30,000 light years from the center of it. And that doesn't mean we're right on the edge of it. So there's, it's vast. And to consider that there are 2,000 of those in one sliver of the universe.

Meaning there are a whole lot more. In fact, they estimate that the universe contains 100 billion galaxies. 100 billion.

What could we come up with that would make that a manageable thing to think about? 100 billion galaxies. And each one, each galaxy contains somewhere around 100 billion stars.

So they conceivably have 100 billion solar systems in each galaxy. 100 billion stars.

The Hubble telescope also found what they call star clusters way out there. 11 million light years from Earth. Quasars.

[14:36] Anybody know what a quasar is? Well, I looked it up and, depending on the website, they don't really know what they are, actually.

They're way out there. And they have found about 1,000 of them. And they're 2 billion light years from Earth. 2 billion light years. All right, so what are we saying here?

What are we trying to do? I'm not trying to just wow us with the size of our universe. We serve a big God, you know. Yeah. I mean, it is incomprehensible, the size of our universe.

And Isaiah is saying that God has measured it all with the span of his hand. You put that aside.

If we can't comprehend the universe, how could we ever completely comprehend God? And if we could, well, you know, what kind of God would he be if we could comprehend him in his entirety?

[15:37] It's immeasurable by man, and God only needs one hand to do it. All right, well, who has calculated the dust of the earth in a measure? A third, one-third measure, literally.

It's measurement. Calculated the dust. All right. Who has weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? And we'll go from the dust, the tiniest little particle that we can see, to the largest things that we can think of on our planet, from the dust to the mountains.

Who's calculated and weighed these things? You know, just picture the Rocky Mountains and some of the other mountain ranges that we know about on the earth and put them all together, you know. Who weighs them? Who knows the weight of them? I'm sure some scientist somewhere has come up with an estimate or some calculation based upon I don't know what.

You know, all the mountains are made out of different kinds of rock, and there are caves inside of them, and there are all kinds of unknowable things. And who can possibly weigh them? Well, God does.

[16:44] God knows the weight of them. That's not just trivial stuff with him. You know, a lot of people know a lot of things that are trivial, trivial information. But the point here is that God is so great, and he knows all these things.

And verse 26, lift up your eyes on high and see who has created these things. That is the stars he's talking about. Who brings out their host? Who brings out their host by numbers?

That is, one by one and calls them all by name. Remember, the universe contains, best estimate, 100 billion galaxies.

All right? And each one has 100 billion stars. I've already mentioned that. And so 100 billion times 100 billion equals, get a calculator.

And I did, and there's the number. One followed by 22 zeros. I don't know, what is that number? That's a bunch.

[17:49] But the point is that God put them there. Put all those stars there. We can't even see all of them at any given time. We can only see a fraction of how many stars there are.

And so it begs the question, well, why? I mean, why did God do that? He put them there. He numbered them. According to Scripture, He's got them numbered.

None of that, He named them. So they're not just a number. They're named. And, you know, what's the purpose of that?

We'll find out one day. Like some wag said, he said, why did God go all the trouble to do that? The answer is, what trouble? What trouble?

God just put them there, and He named them. In verse 26, because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power, not one of them is missing. I know we hear about stars falling.

[18:51] Of course, those are actually not stars. But I grew up thinking they were. And, of course, we do hear about stars going to supernovas. But the point here is that God keeps track of all of them.

He knows, just like He keeps track and knows the number of the hairs on your head. You know, just like some of the stars might be going away, God keeps track of that, just like He does the number of hairs.

And we're losing hair every day. Some of them is quicker than others. And so, there's God. Not one of them is missing. You know, I heard it again this last Christmas.

Maybe some of you did this and thought it would be a great gift to give to that special loved one to have a star named after that person you love.

That's what you give for Christmas. How would you like to unwrap that? You know, Christmas, you've got a little card that says, there's a name, a star named after you. It's the National Star Register.

[19:57] Have you ever heard of that? Yeah. I probably shouldn't be so, you know, so sarcastic about it. Maybe some of you did that. I don't know. But it would be great if you've got a star named after you out there.

Well, they need to check with God because the star is already named. I don't know how we find that. You know, there are now 7 billion people on this planet right now.

And they're all named, I guess. But they're not all different names. I was sharing this with my guys in Ukraine.

And I had, I think, five Sashas in the class. You know, and that's just one class. You know, you can go throughout the Russian world and find Alexander or Sasha and Vladimir and, you know, all those names.

There's a lot of repeats. I've met some Dons. And, gracious sakes, how many Mikes are there in this room? Not nearly enough. There's two in this room here tonight.

[21:02] So, yeah, not nearly enough. So, you know, a lot of repeats. But God has named each star a different name. And there are more than 7 billion of them. I don't know what name they are.

But, see, we don't want to dwell so much on that. That causes more questions than answers. And we're not going to have those questions answered. The point of it is the greatness of God. The greatness of God.

We bring it down to earth. What about the greatness of God compared to the nations of the earth? Well, Isaiah has something to say about that, too. Verse 15. Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket.

That's pretty insignificant. Again, it's compared to God. A drop in a bucket. Or, really, more literally. Because I can see a drop. The language, more literally, means a drop of moisture falling from a bucket.

Insignificant. And that's what the nations are before God. Even the greatest of them. Even our nation. As great as our nation. In comparison to God, before God, we're just moisture in a bucket.

[22 : 15] And then he says, and the nations are counted as the small dust on the scales. Now, that's something. Small dust on the scales.

I don't know if I would ask this question in there, but imagine going to Walmart. And, you know, you bought some apples. And you've got your little bag of apples.

And before you set it on the scale, you say, what the dust off that scale? You know, I don't want to pay for the dust on the scale. Would you ever do that?

I know they get dirty. Maybe there's larger particles sometimes. But maybe you've got a valid point.

But, you know, the dust on the scale, how much would it weigh? Well, it would be insignificant.

So, the Bible's talking about the nations before God. They're like dust on the scales. They're counted like that. And that's our God in comparison to all the ruling nations in the world in all of history.

[23 : 17] Not just those currently today, but all the great empires of old as well as all the great nations of our day today. And what about their power in comparison to God?

Verse 17, all nations before him are as nothing. I want you to follow the progression. I know I've got it in your notes, but I want to emphasize it. All the nations before him are as nothing.

That means non-existent. And they are counted by him less than nothing. I don't know how you can have less than nothing. Less than non-existent.

And they're worthless. Empty. Empty of meaning, empty of purpose is the idea behind that word worthless. That doesn't mean that God doesn't care for the nations.

And that God doesn't love the nations. He certainly does. You know, absolutely. But we're talking about the nations as great as they might be.

[24 : 16] And think about all the great civilizations throughout the history of the world. Compared to God, they're less than nothing.

Less than non-existent. And empty. And meaningless. Meaning, empty of any purpose. I put Acts 17, 26 down there.

And he has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth. And has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings. Men have not determined that.

And being great nations that have, you know, been imperialistic in the sense of conquering nations and growing. Think of Alexander the Great and some of those in history.

Napoleon. And Great Britain in those days when they were expanding around the globe. And so they thought they were growing their borders.

[25 : 16] But God is the one that determines it. Determines the borders. What about the rulers? Kings and rulers and whatever term a civilization uses.

All the kings and emperors and dictators and presidents and princes and queens and so forth. Are completely subject to God's sovereign power and his counsel.

His control. Absolutely subject. Proverbs 21, 1. The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord. Like the rivers of water. He turns it wherever he wishes.

That's our sovereign God. Isaiah says in verse 24. For scarcely shall they be planted. Scarcely shall they be sown. Scarcely shall their stock.

That means their stem and trunk. Take root in the earth. That is, shortly after they come to a place of power. They're established. He will also blow on them.

[26 : 18] And they will wither. And the whirlwind will take them away like stubble. And when you look at the history of civilization on the earth from the bigger picture.

We can begin to see that. But even if we get back from it and look at how long, say, the Roman Empire existed in all of her glory. In terms of the years of history. In terms of history. It's pretty insignificant. But in terms of eternity. How insignificant.

And God sees all things. Even the end from the beginning. And so he can look and see how insignificant all these nations are and all their great power is.

The second point from this prophecy or from Isaiah is that the greatness of God is beyond any comparisons.

[27 : 20] And we've really already been doing that. But now he's going to just really get down to some spiritual things and religious things that men have embraced over the years.

He says, to whom then will you liken God? What can you compare God to? Or what likeness will you compare with him? As for the idol, the craftsman casts it.

It's created by the craftsman. A goldsmith plates it with gold. A silversmith fashions chains of silver. The creation of an idol.

Gods of gold and silver. Or you can compare the God of gold and silver. And all of its ornate trappings and so forth.

Whatever the craftsman can devise in his own imagination. Can you compare that to God? There's no comparison. Goldsmith plates it with gold.

[28 : 23] The silversmith fashions chains of silver. He who is too impoverished for such an offering. Selects a tree that does not rot. Some kind of wood that won't rot.

All right. So that's the best the poor can do. And he seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman to prepare an idol that will not totter. Won't fall over.

You know, we've got to help this God out a little bit. Do you not know? He asked. Have you not heard? Has it not been declared to you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth? It is he, the one true God, who sits above the circle of the earth. And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.

Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain. And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. These are, you know, the imagery of all this is intended to cast in our minds the greatness, is the absolute supremacy of God.

[29 : 35] Not just the greatest. He is the only great God. And the only great God. I remember a story. I probably have told this story before.

But a story I heard Adrian Rogers tell one time. He was talking about this lady who was going to take a trip on a plane. It was the first time she'd ever flown. And she was so excited about it because she'd heard about it, you know, about getting way up there in the air.

And so she's buckled into her seat and she looks out the window and she starts to scream. She says, it's true. It's true. It's really true. And the stewardess was walking by. And she said, it's true. Look, people really do look like ants from up here. And the stewardess said, those are ants, stupid. We haven't taken off yet. So, you know.

But to God, of course, this, you know, again, is just an analogy. And the scripture bears it out.

[30 : 40] You know, people are like ants. All right. So our God is great beyond understanding, great beyond any comparison. And then I wanted to close with this excerpt out of a really excellent book by J.I. Packer, Knowing God.

If you ever get a hold of that book, you ought to read it. Some of it you'll have to read and reread and read again because Packer is a theologian.

And some of it's pretty tough to get through, but it's very good. Very good. Very right on. And I like this excerpt from the book.

These five basic truths or foundational principles of the knowledge of God. And these, I think, really help serve as part of the foundation, the spiritual foundation for spiritual formation.

And here they are. There are five of them. And he is going to tell us at the end that he believes these five are all conclusive. You couldn't add a sixth.

[31 : 50] And he says God has spoken to man. That's number one. Now, this is, these are basic truths, foundational principles that form a foundation for spiritual formation.

The first one is God has spoken to man. Now, that by itself is an incredible thing. Imagine that he never did that.

Never spoke. I've mentioned this before. My theology of preaching begins with this reality that God has spoken.

I preach because God has spoken. And I would go a step further. What he spoke, he had written down. And what is written down, the preacher proclaims.

That's a theology for preaching. But this is more than just simply a theology for preachers. Think about this. What if God had never spoken?

[32 : 55] What would you know of him? Did he have to speak? No, he didn't have to. God has spoken and the Bible is his word. And it's given to us, given to us to make us wise into salvation.

salvation in the broadest sense. Not just salvation in the sense of conversion to Christ.

Regeneration, conversion. Being saved.

But our ongoing salvation. Our sanctification. Our growing. Maturing in Christ. Think about how lacking we would be.

Absolutely lacking. We would be in any knowledge of how God wants us to behave as his children.

Maybe he just gave us enough so that we would know how to be saved.

And then from then on, we just have to figure that out for ourselves. Think about that, if that were the case. But God has laid it all out for us.

[33 : 59] He spoke and it was written down. And the Bible is his word. And it is given to us to make us wise into salvation. The second one, God is Lord and King over this world.

And most of this world does not believe that. And more than not believing it, they out and out reject it. There have been wars fought over this truth.

God is Lord. We're talking about the one and only true God. Yahweh God. He is God. He's Lord.

He's King over this world. He rules all things for his own glory.

He doesn't rule all things so that everything works out great from our perspective. Because things aren't always working out great from our perspective.

But God is infinitely beyond us. And he rules all things according for his own glory. For his own glory.

[35 : 03] And he will get all glory. Displaying his perfections in all that he does. In order that men and angels may worship and adore him. That's a tremendous statement.

It's an all conclusive statement. God has spoken to man. He is Lord and King over this world. Third, he is Savior. God is Savior. Active in sovereign love through the Lord Jesus Christ.

To rescue believers from the guilt and power of sin. To adopt them as his sons. And to bless them accordingly. That's a tremendous statement. This is the knowledge of God.

These are basic principles for the knowledge to know God. God is triune. Number four.

There is within the Godhead three persons. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. And the work of salvation is one in which all three act together. And this is so simple how he puts this out.

[36 : 02] And he's so correct. The Father proposes salvation, redemption. The Son secures it. How did he do that? He has the cross.

And his resurrection. And the Spirit applies it. It brings all three together. God is triune.

Number five. Godliness means responding to God's revelation. That's his word. The Bible.

Responding to God's revelation in trust and obedience.

Faith and worship. Prayer and praise. Submission and service. All these things. He's just covering all the things. Our response. That's what godliness means. Godliness is not just some title or something you just have because you've joined the church.

Or you call yourself a Christian. Godliness is how you respond to God's revelation. If we're not responding in trust and obedience to God's word.

[37 : 12] See, he's spoken of God and death. We're not responding to what God has said. Then we're not godly. No matter how godly we may think we are. And then he makes this statement.

Life must be seen and lived in the light of God's word. This and nothing else is true religion.