

MISSING THE POINT

ISAIAH 40:28-31

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

29 He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.

30 Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;

31 but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. (ESV)

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Introduction

There are some individual Bible verses that are so well known that you see them plastered on tee shirts, coffee mugs, bookmarks and Bible covers; cross-stitched on throw pillows and wall art. Their words have comforted multitudes of Christians in their darkest moments. The verse we are going to look at today, Isaiah 40:31, is one of those verses. There is even a chorus based around the KJV of it.

But do you really understand the significance of Isaiah 40:31?

They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles; They shall run and not grow weary; They shall walk and not faint.

There are plenty of Christian merchandisers guilty of bad exegesis. It is not that this verse, when taken out of context, is any more open to misinterpretation than other verse. No, that is not the issue at all.

We look at John 3:16 out of its context and it can stand alone. The conversation between Jesus and the Pharisee named Nicodemus, leading up to and following the sixteenth verse, by its self, delivers the intended message loud and clear. However, Isaiah 40:31 loses its real power within the context of the chapter.

I have T-shirts, a coffee mug and a wall hanging with this verse to remind me of the image of God, carrying me when I am beyond tired from the battle.

However, this verse, when read in isolation loses the impact of the purpose of God. God told Isaiah to write, and the prophet wrote. The problem is that it was never meant to be taken out of its context. It has a real purpose at the end of this passage that ties this passage together.

By understanding this verse in context, it becomes all the more powerful, practical, and encouraging.

Strong Words of Comfort for a Nation in Captivity

The fortieth chapter of Isaiah finds the prophet seeing the southern kingdom of Judah's imminent captivity to the Babylonians in the mid sixth century BC. This section of Isaiah, 40:1-48:22, is often called the "Book of Consolation" by the Jews. Those Isaiah spoke to were going to be taken into captivity in a land not theirs. Their homeland and the great city of David would be in ruin. They were without a king or army to defend them and this once powerful nation that caused their neighbors to fear were helpless in their sight. This captivity was the result of their rebellion against God.

As in the Egyptian captivity, the Babylonian captivity found God's chosen people asking the question, "Where is God and will He rescue His people from their miserable circumstance?" Isaiah responds:

Isaiah 40:1-8 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

3 A voice cries:

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

4 Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

5 And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

6 A voice says, "Cry!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

7 The grass withers, the flower fades when the breath of the Lord blows on it; surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

9 Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"

10 Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.

11 He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Yahweh wants to deliver the people He has chosen. After all, He is the one who placed them into captivity for their rebellion against him. His love for them has no bounds. His word to Isaiah is to publish this good news of God's intention to gather them together as He gently carries and leads them out of bondage.

God is Supreme Over Nature

12 Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?

13 Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel?

14 Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?

Isaiah turns to God's supreme control over nature as a means of showing His ability to deliver them.

Isaiah uses rhetorical questions to prove God's ability over nature as a means to rescue those in captivity.

Who has measured the waters? God has.

Who has measured the heavens? God has.

Who has measured the dust of the earth? God has.

Who has measured the mountains? God has.

Who knows the Spirit and who is greater? God is.

Who was the Architect of Creation? God is

Who created justice? God has.

Who has understanding? God does.

The nation of Israel knew their captivity was great and seemingly had no way out. God gave Isaiah a much greater image of the power of God in all the earth.

God is Supreme Over the Nations

15 Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust.

16 Lebanon would not suffice for fuel, nor are its beasts enough for a burnt offering.

17 All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.

From the vantage point of those in captivity, the Babylonians were more than just a conquering nation, they were their captors. At this time, the Babylonians were the largest of all nations on the earth. They swallowed nation after nation in their rise to power, and God used them to judge His people. However mighty they are, they are no match for Yahweh.

Look at the Babylonians from God's perspective:

Nations are like a drop in a bucket

They are nothing but dust in His sight

Their largest cities would not be enough to fuel a sacrifice of all their beasts

They are nothing to him, actually they are less than nothing.

Isaiah now turns to God:

18 To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him?

19 An idol! A craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and casts for it silver chains.

20 He who is too impoverished for an offering chooses wood that will not rot; he seeks out a skillful craftsman to set up an idol that will not move.

We are not told why Isaiah refers to God not being an idol made by a craftsman. Perhaps, it is in rebuttal for why they are in captivity in the first place. Later Isaiah quotes Yahweh, "I am God, and there is none other." (Isaiah 45:22)

God is Supreme Over Rulers

21 Do you not know? Do you not hear?

Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

22 It is he 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 like a tent to dwell in; 23 who brings princes to nothing, and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.

24 Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when he blows on them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

Linda and I have viewed in wonder, some of the palaces of Kings and Queens in Europe. Buckingham Palace and Versailles are large monuments to the power and splendor of the rulers of those nations. Standing on the grounds of those stately buildings gives you a sense of history that cannot be gained by reading books or viewing pictures.

Isaiah brings the conquered nations gaze to the One True God. Isaiah reminds us that rulers of nations are nothing when compared to Israel's great God. Rulers of empires and nations are only powerful for a short period. All the conquering kings will die and many of their kingdoms with them. Just look at the powers of the earth historically and we see that Egypt, Persia, Mede, Babylonian, Greek, and the Romans are nothing but history, recorded in books to study. Today we are not shaken by any of these conquering nations. In the recent past, the British boast that the "sun never sets on a British Colony."

God's Question for His People

25 To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.

26 Lift up your eyes on high and see: who created these?

He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power not one is missing.

27 Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, "My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"?

28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

29 He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.

30 Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;

God asks, “to whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him?”

In other words, “In light of all this, who or what in the world could ever rival God?” There is nothing in nature, idols, nations or rulers that could ever compare to Yahweh.

“Why,” in other words, “Would you doubt God’s ability to deliver you?”

The Promise of God’s Deliverance

31 but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

This is not the description of a conquered people of the nation of Babylon. This description is of a proud, proven, conquering nation, not a nation of slaves. Look at the use of powerful images as Isaiah explains God’s plan for them.

Planning always considers timing...and their redemption will be in His timing...they must wait. But the Hebrew word “wait” doesn’t mean to sit idly by. The word phrase means to “gather and look patiently. They were to not sit at rest, but were to watch for their deliverance as God’s word of hope comes to fruition.

Isaiah considers the immensity of the ocean and the height of the mountains, and reminds God’s people, “Your God is bigger.”

He points to the most powerful leaders in the world and says, “Your God is stronger.”

He points to the gods their captors worship and says, “Your God is *real*.”

Why does Isaiah go through this rhetorical exercise? Because he wants to convince God’s people of Yahweh’s ability to keep the promise of verse 31.

Conclusion

The title of this message is “Missing the Point.” And my argument is that when read in isolation, Isaiah 40:31 loses this incredible potency of God’s description of His supremacy over all things and the promise He is making to His people.

The entirety of Isaiah 40 proves God’s ability to keep the promise he makes in verse 31. This is a promise banked on the immense credit of God’s strength, will, and faithfulness. When you read this familiar verse in context, there can be no doubt: the God who made this promise is able to keep it.

They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles; They shall run and not grow weary; They shall walk and not faint.