



Sermon Transcript September 8, 2019

We Believe Behold Your God Isaiah 40:9-31

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on September 8, 2019 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Isaiah 40:9-31

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.

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? 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. 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.

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. 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; 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.

Introduction

We begin our journey through the EFCA doctrinal statement by rehearsing what we believe to be true about God.

We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.

This statement about God that we have before us this morning is an attempt to take all of Scripture and boil it all down to a few essential truths that we discover about God through the Bible. It is good to be able to point to a statement like this and say that this is who God is based on the Bible—divine revelation. But it is important to know that when God reveals what he is like, he doesn't do it through a definition like this or a doctrinal statement. Instead, he reveals what he is like in the context of real life.

Why is this important to know? It is important because this series on the EFCA doctrinal statement is not some academic exercise that simply lends definition to what we believe. Rather, this has everything to do with how we live life. The late Christian contemporary singer, Rich Mullins, wrote a song about the Apostles' Creed. Of course, the Apostles' Creed is a concise statement of what we believe. It begins with, "I believe in God the Father . . ." The chorus to the song goes like this. "I did not make it." In other words, these things we confess to be true about God did not originate with us. This is not our personal impression of what we think God is like. Rather, our understanding of what God is like is the result of what has been revealed. These truths were revealed to us by God through the by the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures, which we will talk about next Sunday. So Rich Mullins sings, "I did not make it. No, its making me." In other words, these things we believe about God are shaping the way we live. This confession we make about God intersects with everyday life.

That is exactly what you find in our passage this morning. At the beginning of our passage, in verse 9, we hear Isaiah proclaim to the cities of Judah, "*Behold your God!*" John Oswalt says that in essence the prophet is saying, "*Look, its God!*"¹ He wants them to take a good look at God. He wants them to recall what God is like. This call for them to "*set their minds on things above*" is not some academic exercise he is taking them through or some lesson on a doctrinal statement. Rather, this call to take a good look at God is born out of a real life situation. The people Isaiah is addressing are discouraged. They are despondent. J. I. Packer likens them to a "despairing people against whom the tide of events has been running for a very long time."² It seems like to them that wave after wave has been coming up against them. Often when you are discouraged or despondent or despairing you tend to lose sight of God.

Why were the people of Jerusalem so despondent? They were afraid that God had given up on them. They had just received word in Isaiah 39 that the hand of God's judgment was about to come against them. The mighty Empire of Babylon was going to come and cart them and their possessions off into a foreign land because of their persistent sin. And so they wonder if they have persisted in sin to the point that God doesn't want to have anything to do with them anymore. Does God even want to deliver them and save them? The beauty of verses 9-11 is not just that God wants to save them but that they will partner with God in bringing his salvation to the world. They are the ones in verse 9 who "*herald the good news.*" Isaiah says, "*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!'*" They will get to say, "*Behold, the Lord GOD comes.*" As heralds of good news, they say, "His salvation is coming!" We get to say, "Behold, the Lord GOD has come!" Jesus saves! God is not done with us! He does want to deliver us! But that is not all. He wants to use us to "*herald good news.*" It is amazing how God uses people like us to bring his salvation to a lost world.

But there is a second question that often emerges in the heart of the one who is discouraged because of the troubles of life. It is the question: "Can God deliver me?" "Can God save me?" It is one thing to say that God wants to deliver us, but can God deliver us? Is God able? When you put it that way, it seems like a silly question to ask. Of course, God is able! He is God! But our worry and our anxiety and our fear and our doubt and our lack of boldness and confidence indicates that we question whether or not God can deliver us. It indicates that what troubles us is bigger in our minds than God. J. B. Phillips captures it well in the title of a book he wrote: *Your God is Too Small.*³ And so it is into this context, this real life situation, that Isaiah says, "*Behold your God!*" Don't lose sight of God. God is willing! God is able! God can!

Beholding God is the remedy to whatever troubles you. What is it that troubles you this morning? What has you anxious? What doubts are you wrestling with this morning? Whatever it is, the remedy is the same. You need to *"Behold your God!"* It is into this real life context that Isaiah reveals to us what God is like. The bottom line message of this passage and the EFCA statement about God is this: there is no one like God. Isaiah asks in verse 18, *"To whom, then will you liken God?"* Again, in verse 25, God asks, *"To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him?"* Answer: No one!

So this morning I want you to *"Behold your God!"* I want you to look at your God and I want you to see the incomparable greatness of your God. When we confess in our statement that God is "infinitely perfect . . . Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power" we are affirming the incomparable greatness of God. We are confessing that there is no one like God. But we take this look at God not just to fill in a definition about God, as important as that may be. But we don't stop there. We do so because *"beholding God is the remedy to whatever troubles you."* This is what *"gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength."* *"Look, its God!"*

There Is No One Like Your God

One of the things you are going to notice as we make our way through Isaiah 40:12-26 is that there is no one or nothing that even comes close in comparison to God. The way the comparisons are stated in this passage you come to realize that God is vastly unique. He is completely independent and he is set apart from all that he has made. A word used to capture this aspect of God is the word "majesty." It is a word that declares the absolute greatness of God and it invites us to worship God. In fact, J. I. Packer suggests that the reason our "faith is so feeble and our worship so flabby" is because we lack an understanding of the majesty and greatness of God.⁴

So consider these five ways that God is incomparable.

No one can do what God can do: Isaiah begins by acknowledging that God is the Creator. It is a truth we acknowledge in our confession, "We believe in one God, Creator of all things." That alone sets God apart from everyone else. He is the Creator and we are the creature. There is a clear distinction between the two. Therefore, by virtue of being the Creator, God is the ruler of all things. Paul says in Acts 17:24, *"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth."*

When God asks Job, *"Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?"* Job

comes to the end of that conversation with God and sighs, *“these things are too wonderful for me.”* No one can fathom the power and the wisdom needed to create the universe and all that there is? Scientists try to get their mind around these things, but the more we learn the more we are left to wonder. The modern day astronomer, Fred Hoyle coined the phrase “big bang” from which we get the “big bang theory.” He was actually an opponent of this popular theory on the origin of the universe. What is interesting about Hoyle was that his scientific inquiry led him from being an atheist to someone who came to the conclusion that “there is not a chance that this all happened by chance.” But like other scientists, he could only come up with theories to try to explain the origin of life. As Job said, *“these things are too wonderful for me.”*

And yet, while Job can’t even begin to get his mind around these things, from God’s perspective it seems like nothing. Consider how Isaiah describes God’s act of creating the world. In verse 12 he says, *“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?”* We look at all of creation and we marvel at how vast and majestic it is. God, on the other hand, holds the oceans in his hands and he can measure the heavens with his fingers. All of a sudden, what we consider to be “too wonderful for us” is vastly smaller than the One who made it all. No one can do what God can do! Behold your God!

No one is as powerful as God: Isaiah moves from talking about God’s power over creation to his power over the nations. Isaiah says in verse 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.”* That is an amazing statement when you think of the power of nations and empires. Surely the people Isaiah was talking to felt helpless against the mighty Babylonian Empire. And yet, compared to God, these mighty empires are a *“drop from a bucket.”* They are like dust on the scales. Did you ever weigh dust? Dust doesn’t even register on a scale so why bother even wiping it off. It is inconsequential. That is how much more powerful God is than the nations.

This week I discovered a “Histomap.”⁵ It traces 4,000 years of world history, mapping out the rise and fall of world empires. It was fascinating to see who was in power over different periods of time. Some of those once powerful empires no longer exist. There were two empires that seemed to stretch from 2000 B.C. to 2000 A.D. It was China and India. But the scope of their influence fluxgates throughout time. On this long map of history, the United States of America is just a small part. Isaiah says, *“All the nations are as nothing before him, they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.”*

When we say that there is no one as powerful as God we are saying that God is in control. As we say in our confession, “God has . . . sovereign power.” God does what he pleases and he accomplishes his purposes. God is so far above the nations that there are not enough trees in the mighty forests of Lebanon, nor are there enough beasts to offer God a sacrifice that is worthy of God. No one is as powerful as God. Behold your God!

No one can fully describe God: In verse 18 Isaiah asks, “*To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare him?*” If God alone created and sustains all things and if the super powers of the world are inconsequential compared to God, who can even come up with an image that comes anything close to the likeness of God? This is at the heart of the second of the Ten Commandments. Here we are told that we are not to make for ourselves a carved image and bow down to it. The emphasis of this commandment is not the worship of other gods, but in worshiping the true God through an image or an idol. Any likeness you would come up with to describe God would fall woefully short of the majesty of God.

In Deuteronomy 4, God reminds the Israelites that when he came to them on Mount Sinai, he didn’t come to them in any visible form. They didn’t see God. Rather he spoke to them. So he tells them not to make an image of a male or a female, or an animal or a bird or a fish, or the sun, the moon or the stars. The moment you would do such a thing you reduce God down to that which is created. In verse 18, Isaiah plays along with the absurdity of such a notion. He asks, “*To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare him?*” And then he offers the suggestion, “*An idol!*” Really? How absurd to reduce the incomparable greatness of God to something fashioned by man.

Kim Riddlebarger suggests that if you asked most Christians if they would like to see God that their response would be an eager “yes” even though Scripture tells us that God is “*a consuming fire.*”⁶ 1 Timothy 6:16 says of God, “*who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.*” Someday, we will see him. But today we are content to proclaim that there is no one like our God. “*To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.*” No one can fully describe God. Behold your God.

No one is higher than God: The next thing Isaiah compares God to is people. And he particularly identifies people we think are powerful. He talks about the “*princes . . . the rulers of the earth.*” They are powerful in our eyes because their decisions impact the welfare of millions. They possess the power to do good and they have the power to plunge the world into war. But yet, once again, compared to God they are nothing. He

likens their influence to “emptiness.” They are here today and they are gone from power tomorrow. In verse 24 he says, “*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.*” I love the way Isaiah 62:9 puts it, “*Those of low estate are but a breath; those of high estate are a delusion.; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath.*”

So Isaiah asks, “*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? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers.*” God is so transcendent that he sits above creation and he is not part of it. Packer says that “God is greater than the world and all that is in it, so that all the feverish activity of the bustling millions does no more to affect him than the chirping and jumping of grasshoppers in the summer sun does to affect us.”⁷ We may be affected by the activity of others and those in power, but God does not change. Lest you think that these princes and rulers are the ones who determine the way the world should go; well, think again. No one is greater than God. Behold your God.

No one is more majestic than God: The final comparison Isaiah makes of God is to the stars and the heavens. He invites us to look up and gaze into the sky. “*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.*” When we last visited our daughter and son-in-law in Oregon we went to a remote ranch where there was no other house in sight. One night we sat outside and took in the beauty of the stars. It was awe-inspiring.

Why does Isaiah invite us to look to the heavens? In our common human experience, there is nothing more majestic and it makes us feel our “smallness.” That was David’s response in Psalm 8. When he considered the heavens and the work of God’s fingers he sighed, “*What is man that you care for him.*” Looking into the heavens, David said, “*O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth.*” And yet, God made these stars and knows them all by name. And so God asks through Isaiah, “*To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.*”

Clearly there is no one like God. No one can do what God can do. No one is greater than God. No one can fully describe God. No one is higher than God. No one is more majestic than God. So Isaiah is saying, “*Look at him!*” “Take a good hard look at God.” It is the remedy for whatever troubles you. How so?

The Remedy: Learning How To Wait for the Lord

Notice the question Isaiah asks the people of Israel after describing the incomparable greatness of God to them. He asks them in verse 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”?*” The tense of the verb suggests that this is an ongoing expression of doubt or unbelief, “Why do you continue to say over and over again that your trouble has escaped the notice of God?”

When he refers to Israel as *Jacob* and when he uses the expression “*my God*” he is reminding them of their special relationship with God. This incomparable God has made covenant with them. He is their God. They are his people. How could they even question that this great God who has made promise to them could forget them? How much more so with us? In our doctrinal statement we say that “God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.” After considering the incomparable greatness of God, do you have any question whether or not God can accomplish what he said he would do for us in Christ Jesus? Packer says, “God never abandons anyone on whom he has set his love; nor does Christ, the good shepherd, ever lose track of his sheep.”⁸ “*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.*”

So what do we do? We wait for the Lord. Isaiah says in verse 31, “*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.*” What does that mean? What does it mean to “*wait for the Lord?*” It doesn’t mean that you are sitting around “killing time” just “waiting” passively for something to happen. Derek Kidner said that this kind of waiting is not like you are sitting in your car with the engine running waiting on your spouse who is nowhere in sight. That kind of waiting can be impatient, petulant and rude.⁹

Instead, the kind of waiting we are invited to is a waiting that renews our strength and causes us not be weary. This word *wait* is sometimes translated with the word “hope” or “expectation.” So what it means is that no matter what situation we are in, we depend on God. We do not turn to ourselves for help, but to God. And what we can’t understand, we rest in knowing that *his understanding is unsearchable*. But then this waiting is also an expression of confidence. God will act and God will act on our behalf. “God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make

all things new for His own glory.” And so waiting means that we expect and trust and believe that this incomparable God will accomplish his purpose in us. We readily recognize that God’s ways are not our ways and that the plans of this incomparable God are not discoverable by us. That is beyond our capacity as man. But being who God is and who we are in our limitations, we joyfully submit to God.

So Isaiah concludes, *“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.”* Isaiah’s prescription for you is to “behold your God.” You need a dose of the majesty, power and glory of God. Martin Luther said to his theological sparring partner, Erasmus that “your thoughts of God are too human.” That can be our problem as well. Isaiah says that if we would just keep before us the reminder that there is no one like God, we would be like an eagle who stretches out their wings and without any effort soars off the wind.

Are you weary? Are you losing faith in God’s promises? Are you tired in the heat of the battle? Are you overwhelmed by opposition? You might say “Yes!” to any of these thoughts. And you might wonder, “What should I do?” Isaiah says, “Wait on the Lord!” He is incomparable. He does not grow tired. He is inexhaustible –with excess energy to give. No one can do what God can do. No one is more powerful than God. No one can ever fully describe God. No one is higher than God. No one is as majestic as God. This incomparable God has bound himself to us through the promises we have in Jesus Christ and the hope of the cross and the resurrection. So what is there for us to do? Wait! Behold your God!

Conclusion

This is the fruit of doctrine. A proper view of God impacts how we live.

We believe in one God, Creator of all things, holy, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in a loving unity of three equally divine Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Having limitless knowledge and sovereign power, God has graciously purposed from eternity to redeem a people for Himself and to make all things new for His own glory.

Therefore, we wait for the Lord! Beholding your God is the remedy to whatever troubles you. This week, take a good look at your God!

¹John Oswalt *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 54

²J. I. Packer *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1973)86

³J. B. Phillips *Your God is Too Small* (Touchstone Books, 1997)

⁴Packer, 83

⁵Nick Routley “4000years of the rise and fall of world empires in one chart”

www.buisnessinside.com December 4, 2017

⁶Kim Riddlebarger “Seeing God Face to Face” *Tabletalk Magazine*, November 1, 2010

www.ligonier.org

⁷Packer, 87

⁸*Ibid.*, 88

⁹Derek Kidner “Your God is Too Small” April 11, 2018 www.ligonier.org

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COMMUNITY GROUPS



Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share with the group a highlight of your summer?
2. As you look towards the Fall months, what challenge do you anticipate?
(Spend some time in prayer: thanking God for the highlights of the summer and praying for the anticipated challenges of the fall.)
3. What is one thing you are taking from the sermon?



Diving Into The Word

4. Read the EFCA doctrinal statement about God on page 3. What about God from this statement stands out to you? How do you think these truths shape us? Give an example.
5. Read Isaiah 40:12-25. Observe the comparisons Isaiah makes between God and us. (40:12, 15-17, 18, 22-24, 25-26) What do you observe about the incomparable greatness of God? How do these things strengthen and encourage your faith?
6. Read Isaiah 40:27-29. Do you ever wrestle with feeling like God does not take notice of you? What causes you to lose sight of God? What encouragement do you get from these verses?
7. Read Isaiah 40:30-31. Discuss what it means to “wait for the Lord.” Share an example from your life where you trusted in God and your strength was renewed.



Taking It Home

8. Look at the doctrinal statement again and use it to guide you in a time of worship and prayer. What do you want to take from the statement and express in worship to God?
9. What do you want to do this week to “behold your God?”