

Incomparable Isaiah 40:18-26

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Series: Transitions / Isaiah 40:18–26

People make comparisons

Comparisons are natural

We like to make comparisons, don't we?

Facebook—LeBron James—iPhone 8

Isaiah's people had a tendency of comparing God to worldly things, so he challenges them with a question:

Isaiah 40:18 NIV

¹⁸ With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him?

Compare God?

Who would they compare God to in leading them in the major transition they faced? They'd been in exile meaning physically they were displaced from their homes and spiritually God's presence was no longer with them—70 years later—it's time to return to their homeland and God's presence will return to them. During this transition, Isaiah commanded them to build a road for God because he was coming back.

Isaiah 40:3–5 NIV

³ A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert 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 people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

God was coming back! What a transition—we're always in transition, aren't we? We never know what's around the corner until—we're there. We can imagine what it'll be like and even predict how it'll go but in reality it's a desert journey and the desert never stops. I'm in a desert everyday—raising kids? I imagined what it'd be like to be a dad and now I'm doing it. I predicted how it'd go and if I were a gambling man I'd lose everything because its far from what I thought. The reality is I'm terrified everyday because I'm still trying to figure out life for myself. My wife and I want so much for our daughter but we're parenting in a desert. We never know how it's going to go.

What transition are you in today? In what desert does God want you to build a road? What unknown path is in front of you? God wants you to build a road. You've built a road by coming here today—that's one way.

We see next how easy it is to bypass building a road and instead build something for ourselves to help us in the desert. Isaiah knows this when he writes:

Isaiah 40:19–20 NIV

¹⁹ As for an idol, a metalworker casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. ²⁰ A person too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot; they look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple.

Mirage in the desert

The desert is an unknown journey and when we don't know the way we can begin to trick ourselves into thinking we do. It's like a mirage in the desert, we can conjure up a distant image of the way out. Isaiah is warning his people that whatever they think can get them out of their desert is only a mirage and can't compare to God.

Israel's people know this story all too well. It certainly would've reminded them of their ancestor's exodus story when they compared God to an image. As a people about to go on an exodus journey themselves, they face the same test their ancestors faced. During their desert experience—who would receive their worship?

As Moses is on the mountain meeting with the LORD, the people wait and Aaron, at the bottom of the mountain is meeting with the Israelites.

Exodus 32:4–5 NIV

⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.” ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, “Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.”

False idols!

The people exchanged the one true God for an image, a golden calf, and worshipped it. They declared it not only brought them out of Egypt but also called it the LORD. They turned God into what they wanted him to be instead of worshipping who he truly is.

We may not go into the shop and cast a golden calf, but it's in the desert we can see a mirage—an illusion of what will lead us out. Everybody loves payday, right? There's nothing wrong with payday! What happens with a paycheck though? You pay your tithes—make your budget—save/invest—pay your bills—buy the groceries— get the diapers—set aside a Dunkin Donuts' fund. And 'wala' its all gone.

So easily we can create a false image of what'll lead us through the desert. If I only get more money, if I can pay off the mortgage, if I get a promotion, get out of this marriage, if I can just find myself, if I get back to college, or go get my degree. We can believe the mirage in the desert and create something we think will lead us through, but friends it's not a what that'll lead you through it's a who. It's not the bread that lead the Israelites in the desert—it was the giver of it.

It's in the desert we're tested to compare God! It's there we're tempted to fit him into our little world, it may not be a golden calf, but we construct ideas, plans, practical thinking believing it'll get us through the desert. These aren't bad by any means, have a plan, do what you have to do, but do not—everyone say do not—do not let it take the place of God because that friends is an idol! God doesn't ask us to build anything else but a road for him so his presence can enter our lives.

Can I ask you a question? Don't answer that—you don't have a choice. What image carries you through your desert? Is it a what or it a who? Isaiah asks us a set of questions to remind us who we're building a road for:

Compare this!

He built it

Isaiah 40:21 NIV

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?

Isaiah takes them back to the genesis story and reminds them who built it all. Isaiah wants his people to know they're building a road in their desert for the creator God to return to them. So who or what can you compare him to? This is the master builder who has the blueprint. He put the world into motion. He spoke the stars into existence. He separated the light from the dark. What's your favorite animal? Yeah, he created that too!

You and I are building a road for the creator God. There's nothing in our little world we can create—no mirage of what can see us through the desert—that we can compare to God. We can't fit God into our small idea of what we want him to be because he's too big!

How big is he? Allow me to paint an image for you. I love those who take notes, but pause for a moment, put the pencil down because God wants to speak to your heart. How big is he?

Isaiah 40:22 NIV

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.

In other words, take our image of who we may think God is and put him up against this. God is the creator. God is magnificent! God is supreme! God is all-powerful! God is incomparable. Settle down! Can I ask you a question? Don't answer that—you don't have a choice. What's your grid? How big is God in your desert?

You can continue taking notes if you didn't get so excited you threw your pencil. We see next what God builds—God runs.

Isaiah 40:23–24 NIV

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.

He runs it

What God builds—God runs. The Israelites in their exile lost their entire identity and it seemed out of control. It seemed like the powers of the world were in control, but it wasn't out of control for God because what **God builds—God runs**. He's in control.

Watch this! The Assyrians conquered the Israelites and put them into exile. Then came the Babylonians who conquered the Assyrians and the Israelites remained in exile. It seemed out of control, but God was working through these super empires for his greater purpose—Israel's judgment—because of their rebellion against God. God even had plans for them in the desert. **What God builds—God runs**. He's in control.

The Persians come along with their policy and the Israelites went back to their nation and their identity was given back. This is their exodus. God worked through the most powerful of nations to achieve his purposes—in both the exile and the exodus. God was in control because **what God builds—God runs**. He's in control.

Can I take the analogy further? The Greeks then conquered the Persians. When the Greeks took over they spread all through the world and because of that everyone spoke Greek. What language is the New Testament written in? Greek. How did God's name spread throughout all of the world? Greek. **What God builds—God runs**. He's in control.

That's why he says the powers of this world come and go because compared to him they come to nothing. It's so easy in the desert to create a mirage that God is not in control, but God has plans for his deeper purposes even in the desert. He runs the whole show—even if we don't understand it. That's why he says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways." **What God builds—God runs**. God is in control—we can trust him in the desert.

Can I ask you a question? Don't answer that—you don't have a choice. How do you view situations out of your control? What's your view of God? Because if God built—and he runs it—then certainly he's on your side. We see that next when Isaiah writes:

This is personal

Isaiah 40:25 NIV

²⁵ “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.

Notice first it was Isaiah asking the question, now it’s God himself issuing the challenge. It’s gotten personal because God really wants to be with his people. God personally asks us the same question. Who can you compare to me that I should be their equal? What’s interesting is we find the same question in a small little story about 700 years later.

Matthew 16:13–16 NIV

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

The incomparable God—who sits on his throne and looks at the people like grasshoppers—made himself comparable to us through his Son Jesus Christ. The incomparable God built a road into our desert to lead us. He personally asks us—everyday—who do you say I am? I’ve learned I have to answer that question every single day in every desert I face and guess what, it’s not easy. Sometimes the desert gets the best of you—you get hungry—you get thirsty, but it’s not a terrible place to be.

Because it’s also an incomparable view. So whatever desert you’re in—God tells us this:

Isaiah 40:26 NIV

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

If he calls the stars forth by name and not one goes missing—he’s never forgotten you. The desert doesn’t have to be a terrible place. It’s there you can see the work of the incomparable God who asks us to build a road for him because he not only knows you but wants to go before you in the desert.

I pray for our people in the deserts they’re walking—whatever they may be—in the known or the unknown—the seen or the unseen—that they would build a road for you to lead them. I pray they would know they’re not alone that the

incomparable God is on their side. If you want to build a road prayer is one more way of doing that.