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Surely the Nations Are Like a Drop in the Bucket 40: 12-17

Surely the nations are like a drop in the bucket DIG: What is the intended effect of all these rhetorical questions? In each comparison (creation, knowledge, the Gentile nations), how does God fare? How does the LORD regard the power of the nations, even today's superpowers (40:15-17, 23-24)? For whom was this message intended? Why?

REFLECT: Do you believe that the LORD wants to deliver you? Do you think He is capable of doing so? What could stand in His way? Do you believe you are beyond His reach? Can anything separate you from the love of God that is in Messiah? Because a God who cannot deliver on His promises cannot be trusted.

After establishing that **ADONAI** wants to deliver **Judah (40:1-11)** and will not give up on her because of her persistent sinning, **Isaiah** makes sure that **the Jews** understood in no uncertain terms that **He** was fully capable of doing so. In the strongest language possible the prophet of **God** declared that there is none like **the LORD**. With a series of rhetorical questions, **Isaiah** declares that **He** is unique.



We see the omnipotence of God, meaning *He is all powerful*. The first question is this: **Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand (40:12a)?** What is **the hollow** of your **hand**? It is the little space in the palm **of** your **hand** as you cup it. How much water do you think you could hold there? Maybe a mouthful. And yet **God** is so great **He** can hold all the oceans of the world in the hollow **of His hand**. The second question is this: Who has, **with the breadth of His hand, marked off the heavens (40:12b)?** The **breadth of His hand** is known as a span. That is the distance from the tip of your thumb to the tip of your little finger. The vastness of the universe was simply measured out by **God** by the breadth of, or the span **of His hand**. **Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket, or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance (40:12c)?** **He** is also able to measure all the particles of **dust of the earth in a basket**. **He** can hold all the mountains and hills and hold them up in a balance to give us the exact weight. That is the greatness of **God**. Therefore, the first point about **the LORD** is that **He** is omnipotent.

We see the omniscience of God, meaning *He is all knowing*. **ADONAI** knows no equal nor is there anyone to whom **He** can go for advice. Hence, there is a second series of rhetorical questions. **Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed Him as His counselor?** Who has ever served as a **counselor** to **God**? **He** is all knowing; therefore, no one serves **as His counselor**. **Whom did ADONAI consult to enlighten Him, and who taught Him the right way?** Who instructs **God**? No one! **Who was it that taught Him knowledge or showed Him the path of understanding (40:13-14)?** **Who** lectures **God** about justice? **Who** teaches **Him knowledge**? **Who** teaches **Him the path of understanding**? No one, because **He** is omniscient.

The implication of the discussion of counselors here is the plan of **ADONAI** for the redemption of **His** people (see the commentary on **Exodus, to see link click Bz - Redemption**). From whom did **the LORD** get that idea? Some advisor? Was it the brain child of some heavenly committee? Or did it come independently from the mind of **the One** on whom all things depend? If it came from a heavenly committee, then we are all in trouble. But if it came from the mind of **God**, then nothing can stop it. Consequently, **Isaiah** sets the stage for **his** later comments on redemption.

Then **the prophet** moved from the realm of the heavens to the inhabited world; from rhetorical questions to that of utter declaration (**40:15-17**). Nothing can compare to **the Creator** of the world or prevent what **He** has willed to accomplish.

Ever the master of the Hebrew language, **Isaiah** uses several literary devices to make **his** point: metaphors for smallness in **40:15**, an analogy of inadequacy in **40:16**, and a blunt literal statement in **40:17**. This is hardly a new concept for **Isaiah**. As early as **Chapter 10**, the prophet asserts that Assyria was merely a pawn in the hands of **God**. That **the LORD** is supreme is seen through the future reign of Immanuel in **Chapter 11**, and the entire group of oracles against **the nations** in **Chapters 13 to 23**. **His** total sovereignty over every person and every nation is seen again and again. There is no question that **He** is able to save.

In contrast to **His** greatness, we see the insignificance of **the nations** of the earth. **Three points are made here concerning the nations. First**, we see how trivial they are when compared to **ADONAI**. What are **the Gentile nations** – so impressive in **their** own eyes? **Surely the Gentile nations are like a drop in the bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; He weighs the islands as though they were fine dust (40:15)**. Both of these metaphors are powerful expressions of insignificance. **They** are **the drop** of water falling back into the cistern as **the bucket** is pulled up, the speck of **dust** on the pan of the balance scales that does not even cause the scales to flutter. Both are temporary and neither are noticed.

Secondly, we see their insufficiency of **the Gentile nations** when compared to **God**. There is nothing we can do that would come close to matching the greatness of **the Creator**. **Isaiah** illustrates this point with a synecdoche, in which one part stands for the whole. **Lebanon is not sufficient for altar fires, nor its animals enough for burnt offerings (40:16)**. **God** is so majestic that even the great cedar forests of **Lebanon** could not provide enough wood for the kinds of sacrifices **He** deserves. Nor would the countless animals of those forests provide enough offerings. **Humanity cannot adequately pay homage to the Ruler of the world. All the forests of Lebanon, with their abundance of wood and animals, will not provide a sacrifice commensurate with His greatness.** Nothing we can do puts **Him** in our debt. **He** has to save us because we cannot save ourselves. All of our efforts to take the first step toward **ADONAI**, to meet **His** demands, to satisfy **His** requirement of holiness, or to pull ourselves up by our spiritual bootstraps are never enough.

Thirdly, we see the nothingness of **the Gentile nations** when compared to **the LORD**. Figures of speech give way to blunt statements. **All the nations** who do not know **Him** are **as nothing; they are regarded by Him as worthless and less than nothing** (formless or confusion) **(40:17)**. There are three Hebrew words that

are used beautifully here. The first word means *nothing*, the second word means *nothingness*, and the third word means *confusion*. This word *confusion* is the same word that is used in **Genesis 1:2**, where we read that **the earth was formless and empty**, or the earth was **formless and confused**. **The nations** are nothing, nothingness, and mere confusion. Therefore, there is no comparison between the greatness of **God** and the triviality, insufficiency and confusion of **the nations**.

This bold appraisal does not mean **the LORD** doesn't value **the Gentile nations**. **He** doesn't think **they** are worthless and the many statements in the TaNaKh make this clear. It is merely that by comparison with **ADONAI** (in the sense of **His presence**), Assyria and its gods, Babylonia and its gods, Persia and its gods, fade into insignificance.

But **the Jews** of **Isaiah's** own day were not interested in this message. **They** believed **they** were righteous, **God** would never violate **His** Temple (**Jeremiah 7:1-8**), and that **they** would always dwell in **the Promised Land**. **They** weren't listening to **Isaiah**, **they** just mocked **him** (see [Fm - With Foreign Lips and Strange Tongue God Will Speak to This People](#)). But over a hundred years later **their** descendants would be sitting on the banks of the Euphrates River wondering what had happened to **them**. More than that, **they** would wonder if **ADONAI** even *cared* about **them** anymore. Did **He** *want* to save **them**, or more to the point, was **He** even *capable* of saving them. Very clearly, then, **Isaiah** declares that **the LORD** was not only willing, but because of **His omnipotence** and **omniscience**, **He** was the only **One** who *could* save them. Is it not also true for us?