

September 18

Lesson 3

FOUNDATIONS

OF THE EARTH

DEVOTIONAL READING:: Isaiah 40:1-8

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 40

ISAIAH 40:21-31

**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?**

**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.**

**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.**

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

**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.**

**27 Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?**

**28 Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.**

**29 He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.**

**30 Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;**

**31 but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.**

**They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.**

KEY VERSE

***Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.—
Isaiah 40:28***

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List characteristics of the Creator that are uniquely his.
2. Contrast the life of an individual who acknowledges God as Creator with the life of one who does not.
3. Help plan a worship service that focuses on God as Creator.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. One Isaiah or Two?
- B. Lesson Background

I. Sovereign Power (Isaiah 40:21-26)

- A. Over Earth and the Heavens (vv. 21, 22)
What God Sees, What We See
- B. Over Earthly Rulers (vv. 23, 24)
Rise and Fall
- C. Over the Stars (vv. 25, 26)

II. Sustaining Power (Isaiah 40:27-31)

- A. Shortsighted Israel (v. 27)
- B. Never-Failing God (v. 28)
- C. Never-Ending Strength (vv. 29-31)

Conclusion

- A. Spiritual Adrenaline
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. One Isaiah or Two?

Over the years, some students of the Bible have proposed that someone other than the prophet Isaiah wrote chapters 40-66. This position is taken because the tone and focus shift significantly in [Isaiah 40](#). Assyria, so prominent in the first 39 chapters, is no longer a threat to God's people; Babylon is the new menace ([Isaiah 47:1-7](#); [48:14-22](#)). There is also a greater emphasis in chapters 40-66 on promises of hope and a brighter future for God's people in contrast with the theme of judgment that is so prevalent in the previous chapters.

The book's focus does shift somewhat in the later chapters, but that does not require a different author. C. S. Lewis wrote books that differed markedly from one another in style and content (compare *Mere Christianity* with *The Chronicles of Narnia* series). But no one seriously suggests that these materials could not have been written by the same person.

Furthermore, the New Testament cites passages from throughout the book of Isaiah and never attributes authorship to anyone other than Isaiah. Note especially [John 12:37-41](#), where two passages from Isaiah are quoted, one from chapter 6 and the other from the supposedly different section in chapter 53. Yet John attributed both to the prophet Isaiah. The testimony of Scripture itself is clear: the book of Isaiah is singular in nature, and one prophet is its author.

B. Lesson Background

[Isaiah 40](#) begins with words of comfort to God’s people, specifically to Jerusalem. The “hard service” that “has been completed” (v. 2) likely describes the captivity predicted in [39:5-7](#). God’s people are to be released to return home. That will show that “her sin has been paid for” ([40:2](#)).

But there is more in the future than just that homecoming. [Isaiah 40:3](#) speaks of “a voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord.’” This is fulfilled in the person and work of John the Baptist ([Matthew 3:1-3](#)), whose ministry prepared for the coming of Jesus. Isaiah, who spoke prophetically of Jesus (example: the text from [lesson 1](#)), then continued his Spirit-guided foreshadowings across the rest of his book. Some are the most stirring messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. [Isaiah 53](#) is a prime example, and another will be seen in next week’s lesson.

As though responding to skeptics about whether his words would come to pass, the prophet offered in [Isaiah 40](#) a passionate defense of God’s uniqueness and power. If Isaiah’s predictions seemed too good to be true, then perhaps his hearers needed to reevaluate their view of the God for whom Isaiah spoke. God was more than capable of doing everything his prophet said he would do.

I. Sovereign Power

(ISAIAH 40:21-26)

A. Over Earth and the Heavens (vv. 21, 22)

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?

This verse continues a series of penetrating questions that begin in [Isaiah 40:12-14](#) and resume in [verse 18](#). They challenge Isaiah’s audience to ponder the greatness and uniqueness of their God. He needs no one to advise or counsel him. He is the Creator, and he stands alone as infinitely superior to any other so-called god.

Isaiah’s words in the verse before us appear to be chiding God’s people. It is as if the prophet is saying, “You should not have to be reminded of what I am telling you. You should already know this.” Yet these words can also be aimed at all people everywhere. As Paul says, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” ([Romans 1:20](#)). From the time of the creation itself—from *the beginning* as Isaiah says—this message has been communicated. The Hebrew word translated *beginning* is very similar to the same word used to “begin” the Bible in [Genesis 1:1](#).

HOW TO SAY IT

adrenaline uh-*dreh*-nuh-lin.

Amos *Ay*-mus.

Canaan *Kay*-nun.

entomologist en-tuh-*maw*-luh-jist.

epinephrine eh-puh-*neh*-frin.

Isaiah Eye-*zay*-uh.

Israelite *Iz*-ray-el-ite.

A form of the Hebrew word for *founded* is also used elsewhere in this book to describe God’s creative activity ([Isaiah 28:16](#); [48:13](#)). He is pictured as the master builder, one who does all the proper work that is preliminary to construction of *the earth* (compare [Psalms 102:25](#); [104:5](#)). This fact should serve as a basis for human knowledge.

22a. He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,

This observation is in keeping with the understanding that *the earth* is round, though some suggest that *the circle* refers more to the domed shape of the horizon. Of greater importance to Isaiah’s point is that the Lord sits as a ruler on his throne, in this case as sovereign of the earth.

22b. and its people are like grasshoppers.

This statement reminds us of how the Israelites viewed themselves in contrast with the inhabitants of the land of Canaan ([Numbers 13:33](#), same Hebrew word). This does not appear to be a very flattering description! This is especially so when one considers that human beings are created in the image of God and given dignity and special responsibility as the crowning glory of God’s creative activity ([Genesis 1:26-28](#)). But Isaiah’s use of the word *grasshoppers* is meant to impress upon the readers how they measure up against the Creator. He is the potter, and we

are the clay. We get in serious trouble when we try to reverse the roles (see [Isaiah 29:15, 16](#); [41:25](#); [64:8](#); [Jeremiah 18:1-6](#); [Romans 9:19-21](#)).

WHAT GOD SEES, WHAT WE SEE

E. O. Wilson enjoyed the great outdoors as a youngster. He was born in 1929, and this meant that there were no electronic gadgets to tempt him away from exploring nature! But pleasure turned to pain one day when he injured his right eye while fishing. He did not tell anyone what had happened, but his parents took him for surgery when the pupil clouded over with a cataract.

Wilson ended up with full vision in his left eye only, but the sight in that eye tested at a sharp 20/10 on the eye chart. His ability to see intricate details of the smallest kind opened his eyes, so to speak, to the wonders of nature—specifically butterflies and ants. Wilson became one of the world’s foremost entomologists.

Isaiah describes the Lord as one who sits high above and observes us almost as an entomologist studies grasshoppers. But unlike insects, we are made in the image of God—and so his surveillance is anything but mere dispassionate science. He is sovereign over all of creation.

Sadly, Wilson has declared that “for the sake of human progress, the best thing we could possibly do would be to diminish, to the point of eliminating, religious faiths.” Perhaps Jeremiah has the best response: “You foolish and senseless people, who have eyes but do not see” ([Jeremiah 5:21](#); compare [Matthew 13:13](#)). How do we get skeptics to lift their “eyes and look to the heavens” to ponder the Creator ([Isaiah 40:26](#), below)?—D. C. S.

**^{22c} He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.**

The Hebrew word translated *canopy* is quite rare in its noun form, occurring only here in the Old Testament. But the parallel phrase *tent to live in* helps us get the meaning: the idea is that of a place of habitation (contrast [Psalm 69:25](#)). This is in keeping with similar language elsewhere (see [Psalm 19:4](#); [Isaiah 54:2](#)).

B. Over Earthly Rulers (vv. 23, 24)

**²³ He brings princes to naught
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.**

A further statement of God’s sovereign power is given in parallel thoughts:

<u>Action</u>	<u>Object</u>	<u>Result</u>
brings	princes	to naught
reduces	rulers	to nothing

Earthly rulers are often prone to think of themselves far more highly than warranted. But God has ways of correcting such arrogance (examples: [Daniel 4](#); [Acts 12:19b-23](#)).

The Hebrew words for *naught* and *nothing* are both used earlier: “Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing” ([Isaiah 40:17](#)). What is true of earthly rulers is true of nations. Isaiah is not saying that the nations and their rulers mean nothing to God or that he has no concern for them. He desires the “ends of the earth” to be saved ([Isaiah 45:22](#)). But without God, both nations and rulers are destined to come to nothing (though in the world’s eyes they may become quite renowned).

When compared with the sovereign God, the idea that humans can create a “sovereign nation” or designate a “sovereign ruler” becomes absurd. There is only one true sovereign, and he is the Lord.

What Do You Think?

How can we help one another appreciate our insignificance when compared with God? Why is it important to do so?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding personal independence
- Regarding our impact on the universe
- Other

**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.**

Earthly rulers in their arrogance sometimes act as if they are indestructible, as though they will always be in power. Even those who harbor no such illusion may view their nations as permanent. But all earthly rulers and nations are subject to ending up in the proverbial “dustbin of

history” (compare [Daniel 7, 8, 11](#)).

The Hebrew word translated *take root* is a verb form of the noun translated “roots” in [Isaiah 11:1](#), which describes the nature of the promised Branch (see [lesson 1](#)). His roots will be firmly planted under God’s blessing, unlike earthly rulers in view here. All it takes is but one breath from the sovereign God for them to *wither* to nothing. When that happens, they are worth no more than *chaff* to be discarded (compare [Job 21:18](#); [Isaiah 41:2](#); [Daniel 2:35](#); [Luke 3:17](#)). Would that earthly rulers today viewed themselves as subjects of the one, true sovereign! What a difference it would make in how they carry out their responsibilities!

RISE AND FALL

Frank Reed has put together a fascinating animation (available on YouTube[®]) that depicts the changing of European borders over the course of 1,000 years. Viewers are treated to the rise and fall of empires in less than three minutes!

In light of God’s sovereignty, Isaiah does not seem to take political power all that seriously. Kingdoms rise and fall. Emperors conquer great lands only to be conquered themselves. Many powerful people from history have only a few paragraphs dedicated to them in textbooks.

Sometimes earthly power is used in ways that honor God; more often it is not. In all cases, however, earthly power and authority are always temporary. As the tenure of one leader ends, another steps up to take his or her place—a cycle repeated thousands of times throughout history. If nothing else, let us remind ourselves that our time on earth is limited, regardless of our status or the power we wield. What matters is whether or not we use our positions of influence to glorify God.—D. C. S.

C. Over the Stars ([vv. 25, 26](#))

²⁵. “To whom will you compare me?

Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One.

This verse raises a question in two forms. Of course, the Scriptures themselves compare God with various objects as a way to express certain of his characteristics. [Psalm 18:2](#) alone uses five such comparisons: God as a “rock,” a “fortress,” a “shield,” a “horn,” and a “stronghold.” These imply strength and security. [Psalm 91:4](#) mentions “his feathers” and “his wings” to call attention to God’s ability to shelter his people. The point of Isaiah’s question is that no other so-called god is like the Lord, none is his equal.

The title *Holy One* is used by Isaiah far more than any other Old Testament writer, with more than half the occurrences in his book. This feature may be linked to Isaiah’s personal experience of God’s holiness during the prophet’s own call to ministry, as recorded in [Isaiah 6](#) (note [v. 3](#)).

What Do You Think?

Based on your own experiences with God, what adjectives would you use to describe him?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- When reflecting on spiritually “up” times
- When reflecting on spiritually “down” times

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.

Isaiah now challenges his audience to consider an example of God’s supremacy. The prophet specifically calls attention to *the starry host*, indicating that the Lord takes a personal interest in them given that he *calls forth each of them by name*. How? By *his great power and mighty strength*. The awe-inspiring nature of the heavenly array serves a profound purpose in reminding observers of the Creator (compare [Job 9:7-9](#); [38:31, 32](#); [Psalm 19:1](#); [Amos 5:8](#)).

Modern science establishes that stars can die as they explode (supernova) then fade out, which may make us wonder about the phrase *not one of them is missing*. We should realize that a supernova is an extremely rare sight, particularly in times that lack telescopes. Indeed, the first record of an observed supernova is not until AD 185. People’s regular experience is that the stars are always there, the same ones night after night. God is in control. He is the one who sustains the stars, just as he is the one who will bring their existence to an end on the last day ([Mark 13:24-29](#) [quoting [Isaiah 13:10](#); [34:4](#)]; [2 Peter 3:10-12](#)).

II. Sustaining Power

(ISAIAH 40:27-31)

A. Shortsighted Israel ([v. 27](#))

**27. Why do you complain, Jacob?
Why do you say, Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?**

Isaiah offers us more parallel expressions, with *complain* equivalent to *say*, and *Jacob* equivalent to *Israel* (compare [Genesis 32:28](#); [35:10](#); [46:2](#)). These direct the question that follows (which is also in the form of two parallel expressions) right at the covenant people: How can they possibly claim that their *way is hidden from the Lord* and their *cause is disregarded by ... God*?

Perhaps Isaiah is looking ahead to the time of the Babylonian captivity ([Isaiah 39:5-7](#)) and anticipating the doubts that some will entertain as time drags on. Is God really going to bring his people home? Does he even care about bringing the punishment to an end? Isaiah questions why the people should ever think this way, given what he has just stated to be true about God. In effect, Isaiah is asking rhetorically, “If God has counted the stars and given them names, will he not also care for his people and keep his promises to them?”

B. Never-Failing God (v. 28)

**28. Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.**

The two phrases that begin this verse are similar to the two that open [verse 21](#), above. The questions in [verse 21](#), however, are written in the plural in Hebrew, while the phrases here are singular. It is as if Isaiah is making his appeal more personal at this point. The God who cares about each and every star ([v. 26](#)) also cares about each and every person.

The questions in [verse 21](#) lead to a declaration of God as the sovereign ruler over creation and earthly rulers. The questions here lead to a reassurance of God’s strength and power, which never weakens. The Israelite people in their (future) captivity—or for that matter, people in any kind of crisis—may grow *weary*, but *the everlasting God* is not subject to such limitation.

What Do You Think?

What experiences have you had with the fact that God does not grow weary? How do these relate to [Isaiah 1:14](#) and [Malachi 2:17](#), if at all?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding non-sinful mistakes
- Regarding sin

Later the prophet will make a statement similar to *his understanding no one can fathom* when he relays the Lord’s declaration that “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” ([Isaiah 55:9](#)). We cannot be educated so as to understand the ways of the Lord in every circumstance. That is not possible for finite humans (compare [Job 38-41](#)). What is required of us is simple, trusting faith ([Luke 18:17](#); [Hebrews 11:6](#)).

C. Never-Ending Strength (vv. 29-31)

**29. He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.**

Among the wonders of Israel’s (and our) God is that his power is evident not only in creation in general but is also available to humans personally. But it is not given to those who are proud and self-sufficient (compare [Proverbs 3:34](#), which is quoted in [James 4:6](#); [1 Peter 5:5](#)). It is in *the weary* and *the weak* where God’s power is seen most clearly. This is a lesson the apostle Paul learned personally (see [2 Corinthians 12:7b-10](#)).

**30. Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;**

Younger people often are the ones who most think themselves able to handle or do just about anything on their own. But they too can reach a point where struggles and disappointments leave them “gasping for air” in a spiritual sense. Without a genuine relationship with God, their resources are limited to those of this world—resources inadequate to cope with the brokenness that we inevitably encounter on this sin-cursed planet.

What Do You Think?

How can we teach patience to those younger (either physically or spiritually) than us?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Concerning God's answering prayer
- Concerning God's righting of injustice
- Other

**31. but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.**

Here is the grand climax to the chapter. Those who *hope in the Lord*—the ones who look expectantly to him and find hope in his steadfast promises—are the ones who will find *their strength* renewed. The reference to *wings like eagles* suggests soaring far above the earth below. Whether the pace demanded of us is fast (running) or slow (walking), the Lord's strength provides the resources to do so. It is he, not the world, who empowers us through life.

Conclusion

A. Spiritual Adrenaline

Adrenaline (also called *epinephrine*) is a hormone and a neurotransmitter produced by the body in response to stressful situations. Adrenaline production results in an additional burst of energy. Occasionally we hear of a person who lifts a car off of someone pinned beneath it, and adrenaline is the key to being able to do so. The rescuer, though not very big or strong, suddenly finds a rush of strength to accomplish the rescue.

Today's lesson highlights what might be called spiritual adrenaline—the strength God provides to those who become weary and overwhelmed by circumstances. We all suffer the repercussions of life in a fallen world. Some suffer these more personally and painfully than others. But to all who become faint of heart and who feel they have no strength to continue, there is a strength available that is not their own. It is a strength that cannot be found in this world's resources. It is a strength that does not require any kind of self-help manual, surgical procedure, or dietary supplement. The requirement is merely to place one's hope in the Lord. Those who do, promised Isaiah, find the help they need.

What Do You Think?

When were times that God provided you a burst of spiritual energy at a critical moment? How do you know it was God at work?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Concerning personal difficulties
- Concerning the difficulties of a fellow believer
- Concerning the difficulties of an unbeliever

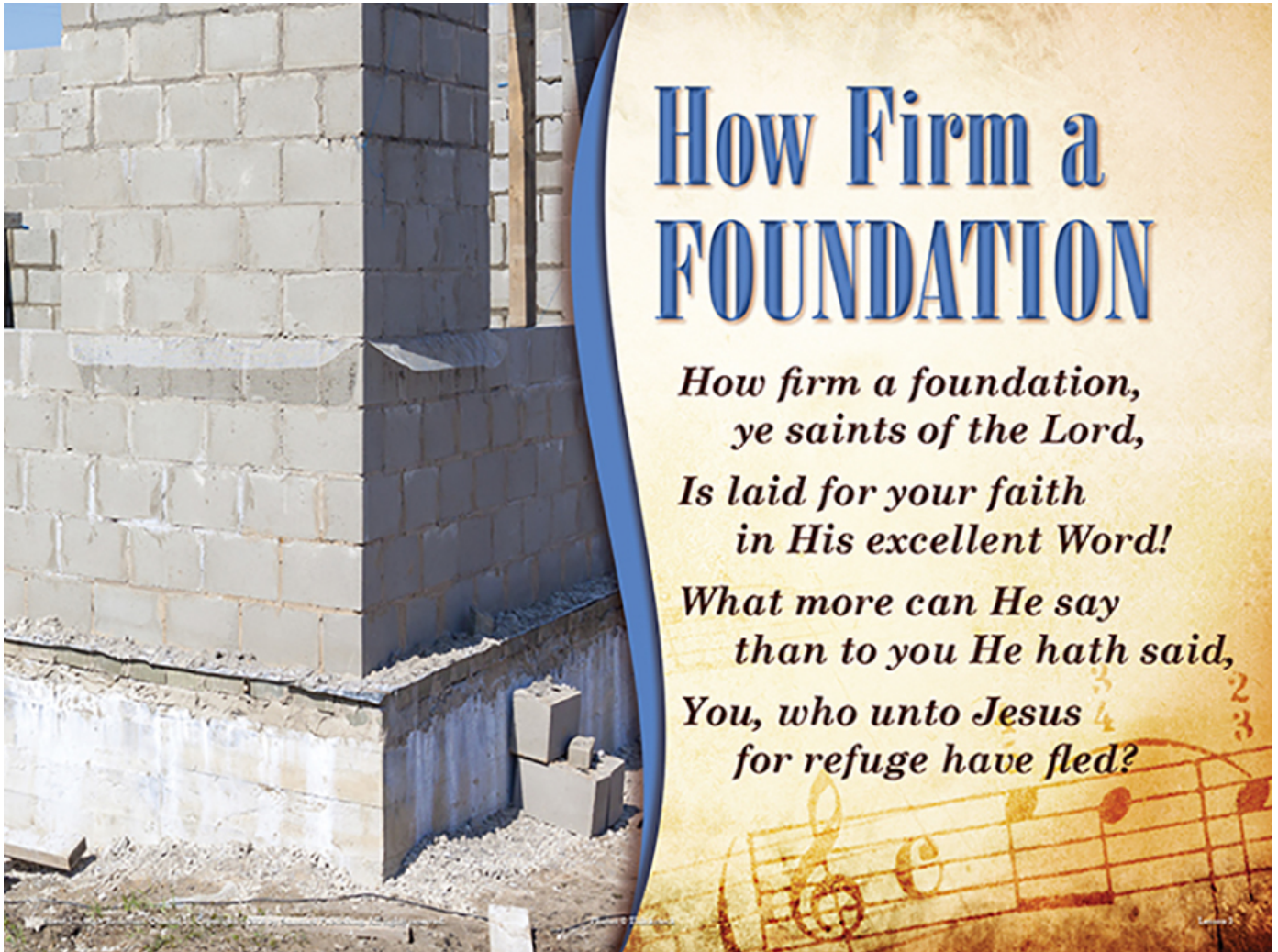
Whenever we study the book of Isaiah, we often focus on what he has to say about the messianic future, as in our first two lessons. But the prophet also has much to say about the messy present that people experience daily. Never forget that everything Isaiah says about the Lord in today's passage is still true.

B. Prayer

Father, thank you for strength to carry us through! May we witness that strength to others so that they too may "walk and not be faint." We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The God of [Isaiah 40](#) is our God as well.



Visual for Lesson 3. For deeper discussion, point to this visual as you highlight other “firm foundation” passages in *Isaiah 28:16; 48:13; 51:13, 16; 54:11, 12.*

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Consider showing a short video of an eagle in flight. The Internet will offer many choices. Simply let the class be fascinated by the majesty and freedom of the bird, and then comment, “Wouldn’t we all like to be able to do that? Today’s text makes us that promise.”

Alternative. Come to class wearing a set of fake wings or simply have a set on prominent display. Respond to learner reactions.

Into the Word

Distribute copies of this word-find puzzle with these directions: “Look at this puzzle to find 12 attributes of God. Once you find them, relate each to today’s text in [Isaiah 40](#).”

H A D V E Y O U N O T K N O
 W I E N ? R O T A E R C H A
 V U N E Q U A L E D E I Y O
 U N O C O T Y H E A R T D ?

H A R S O L I T N O T S B E
 E N H O O M N I S C I E N T
 P B T H V I P O U S T J F R
 O O N M T H E A B E E A G R
 W R E L A E V E R I N M E N
 E I N G ? H A N V A E L Y O
 R G U N O T A U N D B E R S
 F T D O O L D ? G A O L D I
 U S O U N H I S N T H R E O
 L N E I J N H E E A V E N !

The attributes to be found are *CREATOR*, *ENABLER*, *ENTHRONED*, *ETERNAL*, *HOLY*, *INCOMPARABLE*, *JUDGE*, *MAJESTIC*, *OMNISCIENT*, *POWERFUL*, *REVEALER*, *UNEQUALED*. Say, “The filler letters reveal four rhetorical questions and a resounding affirmation, based on today’s text. Write the letters in sequence—with the question marks and exclamation mark—to reveal a grand truth.” The questions are “Have you not known?”; “Have you not heard?”; “Has it not been obvious from the beginning?”; and “Have you not understood?” The grand affirmation is “God is on his throne in Heaven!”

Alternative: Make copies of the “Why Are You Complaining?” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. It can easily be related to the simple truth in the preceding sentence.

Say, “Now let’s look back at the list of God’s attributes. What will be different for the person who accepts the truth of these from one who rejects or denies them?” Consider flash cards with each of the words. As you hold up a card, ask, “How does this attribute of God affect the way you live?” For example, display *REVEALER* and note that regular attention will be given to God’s revelation in the Scriptures; also, a believer will have a curious intentional attitude toward what God has revealed in his creation, an interest in various disciplines such as science and the arts. For *JUDGE*, a believer will be content to leave the judgment of sin in others to God; the believer will live knowing that ultimately he or she will be judged by God.

Alternative: Distribute copies of the “What God Does” activity from the reproducible page. It is closely related to these same truths.

Into Life

Assign groups to make brainstorming decisions in the four categories of planning a worship assembly centering on God as Creator: (1) key Bible texts to be read by individuals or in groups responsively; (2) songs and hymns to be played instrumentally in prelude and postlude, during offering and Communion, and as solos and congregational singing; (3) prayer elements to be emphasized in various prayer times; (4) Bible texts to be studied and developed in the assembly’s sermon/teaching segment.

Allow about five minutes for groups to decide. Collect the ideas to pass along to the congregation’s worship planners/leaders.