

God Can't Be Surprised

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 May 2023

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 0 0] Please have a seat. Before we turn back to Isaiah 44, a quick reminder that we'll have a brief time of prayer about our community open day, our Buklu open day, Saturday the 3rd of June.

So to pray for the workings of that, but also to pray for those who will be invited that God would use that. So a short time of prayer down here, pretty much straight after the service.

For anyone who can give us a few minutes to pray, that'd be wonderful. So we're continuing to think about 10 things that God can't do. Today, from Isaiah 44, we're thinking about the truth that God can't be surprised.

And to think about why that's good news. For us, of course, we can be surprised all the time. Sometimes those surprises are good surprises. We're walking down the street and we meet an old friend.

We go to a restaurant and we experience some new food and it's good. We find ourselves with an unexpected job opportunity, perhaps.

[1 : 1 7] There are good surprises. There are bad surprises. You think your car is working well, you take it to the garage and you get a steep repair bill. You have the bad surprise of broken promises.

Promises we break. Promises others make to us that get broken. Boys and girls, I wonder if you've ever had or been to a surprise birthday party.

To me, that sounds like an absolute nightmare situation. Surprise birthday party. The first time I went to a surprise birthday party was my granny's when she turned 80. That was a very high-risk maneuver.

Tell you what. See, when she walked into that hotel room full of her family and extended family, there was a moment where it looked like she might keel over with a shock. But it was a good surprise in the end.

Why is it that we are surprised as people? Well, partly it's because we are time-bound. Because we don't know what's going to happen, we have uncertainty about our future.

[2 : 2 1] So, for example, the open day that we're planning for, we don't know who's going to show up. We don't know how things will go. And we are surprised because we have limited knowledge. Again, we have limited knowledge of the forces of nature.

So, we don't know is it going to be a good day or a bad day weather-wise. We also have limited knowledge in terms of people's actions and attitudes as they impact on us.

So, we find ourselves surprised. And we talk about everybody having perfect vision, 20-20 vision in hindsight. So, we can look back, maybe see and think, oh, if I'd have known that then, I would have done things differently.

But we don't have a perfect 20-20 vision when it comes to the future. But, of course, that's so different for God because God can't be surprised.

God is not time-bound. Rather, God is eternal. God was there before the universe was created. God was there before there was time.

[3 : 23] And everything then is 20-20 for God. He sees the future just as perfectly as He sees the present, as He sees the past. And, of course, as we thought about last week, God's knowledge is perfect.

His knowledge is perfect over all the events that take place throughout this world. He has perfect knowledge of all people in this world.

He knows the intentions that lie in every heart. He knows the outcome of every moment. God is not like us.

And I hope we'll come to see that this is really good news. In Isaiah 44, that short section that we listened to, there were two messages that God delivers about Himself.

And especially we're going to think about the fact that God can't be surprised is really good news when it comes to the promises that He made.

[4 : 26] You know, when it comes to us and promises, we have something of an uneasy relationship to them because sometimes we forget the promises that we make. Other times, despite our best intentions, we fail to keep those promises.

Other forces take over. But in God, we have one who is never surprised, one for whom there are no rivals, there are no opposing forces, and so we have a God who will always keep His promises.

So there is, in God, one who offers us comfort for all our days. So if you turn with me to Isaiah 44, these first five verses that we read, the first message we can summarize this way, your Creator keeps His promises.

So this section, Isaiah 44, is part of a much wider section where Isaiah is bringing a message against the idols because the idols are powerless, but He's also bringing a message against the people of God who have turned away from wholehearted trust to begin to trust in idols.

And God wants to remind them and us over and over again that God is the only Savior. Therefore, God is the one to be trusted in.

[5 : 58] But there's a wonderful message of hope as well, that despite the unfaithfulness that God's people have shown, there is mercy from God. Hope exists in God because of who God is.

So, to look at verse 2, what do we discover about God? We discover God is Creator. This is what the Lord says, He who made you, who formed you in the womb, and who will help you.

Now, last week we were in Psalm 139, and David was reflecting on the fact that God formed him in the womb of his mother. So it was a very personal reflection.

But now here we're being reminded that God is the one who has formed His people Israel. God has given birth, as it were, to His people, and it's He who will help.

He is the Creator. He's also the covenant Lord. Again, the language there. But now listen, in verse 1, Jacob, my servant Israel, whom I have chosen.

[7 : 12] The use of Jacob, a reminder that to Abraham and Isaac and to Jacob, to that family, God made covenant promises. Verse 2, this is what the Lord says, the personal covenant name of God.

This is their personal God who is speaking. And it's this God, the one who chose them, the one who made them, is the one who will help them.

Now, how will God help this people, this people, this people who had wandered away from Him? God will help because God will keep His promises.

In verses 3 to 5, we have this wonderful picture of transformation of life that God brings. Let me read verse 3.

For I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring and my blessing on your descendants.

[8 : 22] So we can think about a desert springing to life after the rains. We can think about our peace lilies being revived after a good watering.

God turns to His people and says, I'm going to do that kind of transforming work in your hearts and your lives. That their sin, their stubborn hearts will be changed by God's grace.

So towards the end of this chapter, chapter 44, verse 22, God says, I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist, return to me for I have redeemed you.

The stubborn wandering people are called to return and are promised forgiveness. And God says also He'll keep His promises in sending His Spirit.

This is a great hope for the people of God, especially a hope for the new covenant. Looking forward to this time when the power and the presence of God would be with His people in a life-giving, life-transforming way.

[9 : 41] And God says, I will bring change. I will bring change to your offspring. I'll bring change to your descendants. Future promise by His gracious, redeeming love.

And related to that, there's this sense of a new identity for the people in verse 5, so that some will say, I belong to the Lord.

Others will call themselves by the name of Jacob still. Others will write on their hands the Lord's and will take the name Israel. Again, here's a picture of a heart that's transformed.

Instead of wanting nothing to do with their Lord, they're glad to say, I belong to the Lord. That this is a restoration that's going to happen within Israel, but there's also this promise that beyond Israel, as God keeps His saving promises, people will be drawn to Him.

So the Lord presents this hope for their future. You will not always live in exile far away from the promised land. You will not always be hard-hearted towards God.

[10 : 50] Instead, you'll be restored and you'll receive my Spirit and you'll belong to me once more. It's a great promise. And the question is, can this promise be trusted?

And the answer, this promise can be trusted if God can be trusted, if He can be trusted to work and to save, if God can be trusted that nothing can throw His plans off course, then there is real and living hope for the people of God.

You know, we can say to people, don't worry, things will get better, things won't always be like this, but so often we know that we lack the power and the knowledge to bring that guarantee.

Is God like us or is He unlike us? Then becomes a question that really matters. If we are to entrust ourselves for our lives and for our salvation to God, then we need to know that He is a Creator who keeps His promises.

That takes us towards message number two, intended to give hope to the people of God, verses six to eight, which we can summarize this way, your God and King knows the future.

[12 : 19] In these verses, we have the character of God and His greatness in contrast to the idols. One of the great themes of this larger section in Isaiah.

And again, the purpose here is so that God's people might turn back to Him, so that God's people might live with trust in Him.

So, it's a message that still is relevant for us today. What truths about God do we discover in here that would help us to trust Him?

Well, notice all the language that speaks to us of God being powerful. Verse six, this is what the Lord says, Israel's king.

Here is the one true ruler. This is what the Lord says, Israel's king and redeemer. They knew this in their history.

[13 : 25] God rescued them. God rescued them from slavery. God rescued them from their enemies. Their king and their redeemer is the Lord Almighty, the Lord of hosts, the Lord of heaven's armies.

This powerful God is the God who says, I keep my promise. And their history, of course, as they look back, as we look back, gives us lots of evidence that God is all-powerful, that God is mighty to save, therefore, we can and we should trust Him.

He's a powerful God. He's also the eternal God. See that there towards the end of verse six? I am the first and I am the last.

This idea of the timelessness of God, the one who was there before creation, the one who will outlast creation, just as we have about Jesus in the book of Revelation, the Alpha and the Omega.

And the God who is eternal is the God who sees all history perfectly in a single moment. He is all-powerful and He is all-wise, therefore, He is able with certainty to bring about His purposes and His promises.

[15 : 00] God is powerful and eternal. God is also unique. End of verse six. Apart from me, there is no God.

End of verse eight. You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other rock. I know not one. There are no rivals to God's throne.

He doesn't share His glory or His rule with anyone. Therefore, because He is supreme in majesty and glory and authority, no one can challenge Him, no one can shake His plans, no one can halt His purposes.

This God can't be surprised. And this is the God who is good. This is the God who makes covenant promises.

This is the God who saves. And so, He gives them some truths about God, about Himself, but then He also wants to draw attention to His uniqueness compared to the idols in a different way.

[16 : 14] So, we need to think about the test that God sets. We are in exam season in schools and universities and that's always a stressful time.

Part of the stress, of course, is not knowing what's going to come up in an exam paper. That question, have I focused on the right topics? Imagine how different your study and exam experience would be if you knew the questions ahead of time.

Look at the test that God sets. Verse 7, Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since I established my ancient people and what is yet to come.

Yes, let them foretell what will come. So, in this test that God sets, there is one topic. Who can declare the future?

Who can bring the future to path? Taking this test, there is the one true and living God and there are the idols.

[17 : 27] So, God says to the idols, show me, give me evidence that you knew what was going to happen since the time I called my people to myself until now, and show me some evidence you can foretell the future.

It's God's way of saying to us, of course, I do that. I've never been surprised, and I never will be surprised. That's why he says, Is there any God besides me?

No, there is no other rock I know, not one. When it comes to knowing the past, the present, and the future perfectly, in this test that God sets, God gets a hundred percent, and the idols get zero.

They have no power, therefore, they should not be trusted. But God can always be trusted. In the Old Testament, one of the tests of a prophet to assess, are they speaking for God or not, do their words come true?

If they do, they're speaking for God. If not, they don't, because God can't lie, God can't be surprised. The Old Testament contains hundreds of predictions about future history, whether that's to do with individuals or nations.

[18 : 50] Not one of those has failed or will fail. So when he spoke to Abraham, made great promises, but said, before your descendants receive the land, they'll be imprisoned in Egypt for hundreds of years, and then they'll be released.

Well, that happened. When God speaks to Jeremiah and says, here's the message for the people, Babylon is going to come and defeat the nation and make you slaves for 70 years, future prediction, that happened.

When Isaiah in chapter 45 records this message from God that King Cyrus will be raised up to let the people go, to give freedom to the exiles, that happened.

All the Old Testament predictions that we have about Jesus, Messiah, the detailed prophecies about his birthplace, about his life and ministry, about his death and resurrection, all come true.

Our God can't be surprised, and his word and his character therefore can be perfectly trusted. And God sends Isaiah to the people in his day to show them that, to call them back to himself.

[20 : 05] And God would show us that, to show us his great character, his trustworthy character, that he cannot be surprised, that he is all-glorious, that we too would trust him.

Let's think together about three ways this truth that God can't be surprised is good news. We're going to think, first of all, when it comes to salvation.

A couple of fascinating texts, one from the Old Testament, one from the New. Think about the story of Joseph. Do we know about the story of Joseph? Genesis 37 to 50 give us the story of this brother who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, lands up in Egypt, becomes a prisoner in Egypt.

But then, in the fullness of God's time, he is raised to be prime minister of that country, rescuing the nation, rescuing many nations, rescuing his family from famine, so that he can, so that God is shown to be faithful in his promises.

But anyway, once Joseph's father dies, Joseph's remaining brothers are nervous. Is Joseph going to turn on us now that our dad isn't around? And we have that wonderful statement in Genesis 50, as Joseph reflects on the actions of his brothers all those years ago when they sold him into slavery.

[21 : 34] He said to them, you intended it for evil, but God intended it for good, for the saving of many lives. So he says to the brothers, you did what you wanted, you were free agents, and you did what was evil, but what does he say about God?

God intended it for good. God stood behind and above their actions. This God who can't be surprised was able to turn that evil into good.

That God in his wisdom brought salvation and kept his promise to Abraham's family. salvation. The fact that God can't be surprised is good news when it comes to salvation.

When we think in the New Testament, we think about Jesus. We began our service with Acts chapter 2. What did we hear about there again? We heard about wicked men doing what they pleased in putting Jesus to death.

But we also heard about God, that God had predetermined and planned the death of his son as God's way to save sinners.

[22 : 45] So again, we have ultimate evil turned to ultimate good by this God of all knowledge who can't be surprised to bring salvation for many lives.

So we can trust God when it comes to God's saving plan to recognize that truly it is unstoppable. There is no wickedness, there is no force that will derail the saving purposes of God.

Joseph's story, not in Jesus' story, not in the story of Jesus building his church in the world. We were hearing recently, weren't we, about Iran.

And Iran before the Islamic revolution of the late 70s probably only had hundreds of believers. But since that revolution and since persecution, those believers now number in the hundreds of thousands because God's saving plan is unstoppable.

And that's also good news when it comes to our trust for God's work in our lives. Think about Paul's message to the Philippians where he could write in chapter 1 and verse 6 of his letter, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.

[24 : 13] God has begun the work of salvation by calling us to put our trust in the Lord Jesus. And Paul reminds us that our hope for eternal salvation is sure and steadfast because it rests with our all-powerful, all-wise God.

So, those who are trusting in the Lord Jesus can have confidence that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus. God can't be surprised.

There are no forces that can derail his saving plan for his people. That's good news. That God can't be surprised is also good news when it comes to security.

Again, Israel is being encouraged to put their trust in God. Israel, like us, lived in changing times. There were military forces always maneuvering, empires always looking to conquer.

They were a farming society, so there was seasonal changes and fluctuations. And one of the things you discover in Israel's history is that temptation to turn to idols as an insurance policy.

[25 : 41] So they would continue to go to the temple and they would continue to offer sacrifices to God, but they would also offer sacrifices to the idols in the hope that perhaps they would provide peace or they would provide good crop.

those changes and insecurity led them often away from God. Our world looks different, of course, but we recognize, too, that threats and uncertainty are everywhere.

Whether people's fears are related to climate, whether it's the growing health care crisis, whether it's fears about an economy and our jobs, it's easy to be fearful, it's easy to lose hope.

And the temptation that we face as Christians today may be similar to an Old Testament believer to look to find our insurance policy in something beyond God also.

Find rest my soul in God alone was the message of Psalm 62. But can't we be tempted to say, well, I feel like if I can just find a good secure job, then there's where I'll find the security I need.

[27 : 08] Or if I've got a healthy bank account, then I can deal with some of the fluctuations that are happening and I can feel a sense of security. Or maybe if I have a strong family or a network around me, then there's where I'll look to for my security instead of finding rest my soul in God alone.

We recognize that each of those are limited. Every created thing is subject to change and can be lost. But our God, verse 8, there is no other rock.

perfect sense all those hundreds of years ago when Edinburgh Castle was being built that they would situate it on Castle Rock.

There's a strong place, there's a stable place, there's a place for security. It makes sense for us to look to our greatest source of security, to trust and to rest in our God, the rock, the one who can't be surprised, the one who knows how the story ends and all the uncertainty of our futures.

There is one who knows. That's God himself. He knows how the story of salvation is going to end, that there is a certainty that Jesus is going to return as king and judge, that Jesus will establish the new heavens and the new earth, that Jesus will dwell with his people forever.

[28 : 54] That's where our certainty and security is to be found. That's why we must never forget the future promises of the gospel, that we look back with such gratitude to what Jesus did on the cross.

But we also need to look forward, always with hope, to what God will do in Jesus when he comes back again, because those promises are rock solid. Because our God can't be surprised, his purposes cannot be derailed.

One last thing about how this truth that God can't be surprised is good news. It's good news when it comes to our service of him. In verse 8, we find this, do not tremble, do not be afraid, did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago, you are my witnesses.

Is there any God besides me? No, there is no other rock. God calls his people to be his witnesses, to bear witness to the reality that he is that unchanging rock in changing time, that he is the one who has made rock-solid gospel promises to us in the Lord Jesus.

And so, as Christians and as a church, we are invited to live and to speak to show that there is a place of security, that there is living hope, even in uncertain times.

[30 : 34] And to recognize, as we seek to live as witnesses, as we go into our Monday morning, remember that God will not be surprised by any situation we find ourselves in.

God will not be surprised by any conversation we find ourselves having, even if we are, and often we are. And in those moments, we can trust his promises, because we know he doesn't change, and we know he can't be surprised, so we can trust his promise to be with us, trust his promise to help us, trust his promise to give us the words to speak through the Holy Spirit just when we need them.

So if we find ourselves surprised by opportunities this week, we're invited to pray with trust to the God who saw that, to the God who planned that, because our God can't be surprised.

He is the only rock, he is the king, he is the redeemer. Let's pray to our God tonight. Lord, our God, we thank you for the truths that you give us in your word that are intended to give us confidence in you and in your character and in your word of promise.

We thank you that you give us these images of strength and of life to show to us that security and salvation come from you and from you alone.

[32 : 26] Again, we confess our temptation and tendency to look to other things apart from you to find our source of security and hope.

May you cause us to find rest in God alone. May we increasingly understand the hope that we have from trusting in a God who sees and knows all things, that you are able to guide us and to keep us and to help us, that all of your promises are yes and amen in Jesus, that not one of the precious promises we find in your word will ever fail.

So, Lord, as we go into this new week, we thank you that while we don't know what's going to happen, although we make plans, you know exactly what will happen.

Help us to trust in you, help us to call on you, help us to worship you, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. now let's close singing the hymn Christ the Sure and Steady Anchor to remind us of the basis of our confident trust and let's stand as we sing together.