

Isaiah- the last bit

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Date: 12 January 2020

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[0:00] A bit of a difficult job this morning. I'm going to try and introduce the next section of Isaiah.! So if you want to try and find Isaiah 56, that would be really helpful in your Bible.

Because we're going to be looking in these next few weeks, all being well, that's the plan at any rate, at this final section of the book of the prophet Isaiah.

You might even like to read it at home if you're planning to be coming along in the next few weeks. My introduction works like this.

Not far from here, a drunken man entered a corner shop, saw the money in the charity box, helped himself to the box, and walked straight out of the shop.

This is a true story. And you think, that's wrong. Isn't it? I don't see somebody doing that. Walking into a shop, grabbing the box, off they go.

[1:03] You think, that's disgraceful. And you sort of think, I don't know what to say. I fancy doing that. Money that's been given, perhaps generously for some good cause, and some guy just comes in, helps himself to it, so that he can buy drink.

And the question is, is there somebody going to do something about this? Isn't somebody going to do something about this? You might, depending on how close you were to the situation, you might feel quite indignant about it.

That shouldn't be allowed. If you were there, what would you do? Would you say, excuse me, my good man, why are you carrying that? Would you challenge him with words? Would you wrestle him to the ground?

Like in the terrorist attack, you know, some brave person saying, something ought to be done. And would you take him by the scruff of the neck? Give that money back, it's not yours.

Would you call the police? Somebody ought to do something, shouldn't they? You can't just let that happen. Or would you perhaps take a different view and say, well, you've lost that money, I'll tell you what, whatever that was, I'll just put that straight back in.

[2:09] Wouldn't want that loss to take place. Somebody needs to do something. Actually, they called the police. No, they didn't. They actually accosted the guy and got him to give the money back.

It's a little micro incident in sort of the life of our world, isn't it? And we live in a world where there are things that are wrong, disgraceful things that ought not to happen, failure, moral failure.

We live in that sort of world, and we, if we're thoughtful people, we might say, why doesn't somebody do something about this? And that question echoes through these last chapters of Isaiah.

Why doesn't somebody do something about it? And the it, the situation that the prophet saw, wasn't just an isolated incident like the one I've described.

But he's really looking at the whole human predicament. The whole human predicament, as it's given an example or an instance, by the historic predicament of his fellow Israelites.

[3:27] So I've got some quotes, and these are just a few of them. I'm going to look them up. You're welcome to look them up and read them with me if you like. But here, it's something sort of almost at random picked out.

And here they're saying, they say, justice is far from us. Mishpat, that wonderful word for justice. Sedeqah, righteousness, does not reach us.

This is Isaiah 59, 10. We are, we look for light, but all is darkness. For brightness, but we walk in deep shadow. Like the blind, we grope along the wall. He says, feeling our way like men without eyes. At midday, we stumble as if it were twilight. Among the strong, we are like the dead. We growl like bears. We moan awfully like doves. We look for mishpat, justice, but find none. For deliverance, but it is far away. They say, this is a terrible situation that we're in.

[4:27] They're oppressed and exiled. There's another bit. This is Isaiah 61, where it talks about the needs of the poor, and the need of the brokenhearted to have their hearts bound up, the need of captives to be set free, and prisoners to be released from darkness.

And he's thinking specifically about his people who had been taken into exile far from home, far from where they loved, far from where they wanted to be, made slaves, made captives, and he says, we're oppressed and exiled.

Isn't somebody going to do something about this? And it's not only their sort of oppression, exile, that they're far away from home, they had their freedom taken away, but their sense that there is a deep moral and spiritual thing at the root of this.

If I were to continue the Isaiah 59 quote, it would say, for our offenses are many in your sight, and our sins testify against us.

Our offenses are ever with us. And the quote that I put down was 64, wasn't it? Isaiah 64, verse 6. That's the bit where it says, rend the heavens and come down, and they say, this is our problem.

[5:56] All of us have become like one who is unclean. All our righteous acts are like filthy rags. I've lost my place.

We shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind, our sins sweep us away. Calling out from a deep, deep sense of, well, I don't know, despair, you would say, need, you would say, conviction of the fact that they're sinning, sinners, you might say.

And that was their situation. And I would suggest, this is not far, really, from the global situation. Not far from the, a diagnosis, really, of the whole world.

I don't know whether you put two and two together, you just have to read the newspapers, and look at the news. Things are not right in the world, are they? We don't live in a world of peace, and goodwill.

We live in a world where there are many beautiful things, to be sure. But we live in a world where people are cruel, and unfair, and selfish. And this is a moral and ethical failure.

[7:11] And the Bible would say, you just need to realize how deep that is. Because it isn't just a surface thing. It is a deep problem in the soul of human beings, that there is this twistedness of sin.

And that's what they're saying. They're saying, yeah, that's us. All our righteous acts are like filthy rags. We find ourselves in the situation that we are incapable, incapable of doing anything pure, because it's always tainted with sin.

So the global situation, and I want to suggest, that if God has brought us to a place of spiritual honesty, we would say, that's my situation.

Without help, without intervention, that's exactly where I am, or where I would be. Lost, hopeless, helpless, all these sorts of adjectives that get used.

But, this is, the testimony in this book, all of us have become like someone who is in clean. All our righteous acts are like filthy rags. We shrivel up like a leaf.

[8:26] Isn't anybody going to do anything about this? That's their situation. And is somebody going to do something about it? Well, this is a sort of spoiler alert, really.

Yes, somebody is. And the chapters have got interspersed with these crimes, rise of, do you want to say, almost despair. You get interspersed with that, the determination of somebody to say, right, we'll do something about that.

And the person, well, who is the person? It seems to be the Lord himself. Or perhaps we need to tweak that thought a little bit. Let me read to you some passages like this.

So, this is Isaiah 63. Who is this coming from Edom, from Bosra, with his garments stained crimson? Who is this, robed in splendor, striding forth in the greatness of his strength?

Well, it's somebody doing something, isn't it? And the speaker says, it is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save. And then somebody says to this person, why are your garments red?

[9:35] Like those of one treading the winepress. And the person answers, I have trodden the winepress alone from the nations. No one was with me. I trampled them in my anger, and trod them down in my wrath.

I did this, and there was no one else helping me, and I did it. And it sounds like it's the Lord saying that. Verse 5, which is what I just read. No, where I'm just getting, coming to.

The day of vengeance was in my heart. The day of my redemption has come. I looked, and there was no one to help. I was appalled that no one gave support. So my own arm worked salvation for me, and my own wrath sustained me.

And somebody steps in to do something about it, and it looks like the Lord himself. Well, I tweak that a little bit, because we have another person who says, this is now chapter 61, who says, I'm stepping in to help.

The spirit of the sovereign Lord is on me, says this person, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, to release from darkness the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God.

[10:59] I'm going to do that, he says. Who's this? Well, it's the anointed one. The spirit of the Lord has anointed me. And it sets up a really deep question.

Who will actually spring into the stage of world history and do this stuff? And it's rendered particularly fascinating because many hundreds of years later a young man went into a synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, read that section and said to the people listening, today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Could you imagine being in that synagogue where somebody has the, well, they read the scriptures. The spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me.

The Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. They stand up and read it and then say, today this is fulfilled. It's me.

I mean, you would have heard a pin drop, wouldn't you? The gasps of breath. How could he say that? And interestingly enough, to begin with, they go, whoa, that's good.

[12:28] Let me just find the text and I'll make sure I'm quoting it right to, it's in Luke chapter 4. He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down and the eyes of everyone in the synagogue was fastened on him and he began by saying to them, today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

And all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. And then they said, isn't this Joseph's son? And then things began to turn a bit sour and they began to find what he said offensive.

And in the end, all the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built in order to throw him off the cliff.

But it says, he walked right through the cloud and went on his way. It was Jesus, of course, who said this. And what an instance of his personal authority that you have a crowd of people sort of baying for his blood, bundling him out of the synagogue, up the hill to chuck him over the cliff and he can say, okay, enough's enough.

Right, let me through. And they go, okay. So, whoops, somebody is going to step in to do something about it.

[13:56] But I'm getting ahead of myself, really. I'd really like to go back and bring us up to speed with the historical situation so that we can go a bit further next week.

So let's do some of the history and geography. Can I remind you of the beginning of the way the book of Isaiah starts? It says, this is the vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amos saw during the reigns of Isaiah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

This is a map. You got that, didn't you? I've no idea why it's put that dot there. I thought, this is Europe, North Africa, as we would call it, the Middle East.

So have you got anybody here from Bulgaria, perhaps? Yeah, okay. We've got anybody here from Italy? I'm just checking whether people are awake here. Anybody here from Germany?

Thank you, yes. Oh yeah, right, okay. Anybody here from Ukraine? Ah, yes.

[15:17] All right, okay, so I just wanted to check you're awake. that's the, and we're going to focus in on this bit of the map here. That bit, click. You need to understand a little bit of the historical context, not necessarily for this morning, but as we go along.

So, because this is where God's action works out in historical space and time, within real situations, real places, real people.

And real history. So, we need, first of all, Jerusalem. Very important place, central place to this story, which I'll put very briefly and say this is God's headquarters on earth in those days.

As a Christian, I believe that has changed, but in those days, this is God's headquarters on earth. If you wanted to meet God, you had to get on your donkey or get your walking boots out and go to Jerusalem.

And that's where God made himself known. In particular, in a particular place, a bit of space called the temple, which had within it a cubic, very special heart center, which is where God came.

[16:38] It's unique. It's the only place in the world where God would come and meet his people. This country is Egypt. And this is important in the story too, because at one point, Egypt was the bitter enemy of the Israelites.

They became slaves there. And their God, the God of Israel, redeemed his people from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

And he swept them up through many trials and testings, rescued them from Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, and promised them a home in this land here.

And that act of redemption, that act of power, is absolutely central to understanding the story of these people. Okay, that's Egypt.

In the time of Isaiah, the exodus had long passed, but Egypt was offering support to Judah, to this nation here.

[17:54] It used to be an enemy, but now they're saying, well, we can support you, you need friends, you're only a little country, you need big friends, because of this next nation, which is Assyria.

And in the time of Isaiah, Assyria is a very cruel, imminent threat. If you've been to the British Museum and seen the exhibits on Assyria, anybody done that?

I have. I'm not sure I can remember it, but it's very well worth going to see. You can see some of the Assyrian military records of the things that happened as recorded in the book of Isaiah.

Assyria. So the Assyrians were a threat. And Jerusalem has got promises from God which say, you can trust me because I'm faithful.

You don't need to go down to Egypt and get military supplies. You can trust me. A little bit like situations in which God says to us, you can trust me.

[18:59] find it quite difficult to do that sometimes, don't we? I think Spurgeon once said, it's easy to talk about having faith in God in every situation except the one you're currently in.

It's a funny thing, isn't it? But Assyria presented a threat and in the end they came and knocked out the northern part of this kingdom, but not the southern part.

Later on the southern part was knocked out by this huge empire, Babylon, which goes down in history as this huge system, mindset, power, powerhouse against God, Babylon.

And the Babylonians did indeed take the people into exile. And by the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept. What does it say after that? When they asked us to sing some of the songs of Zion, how can, oh I've lost it, somebody help me?

How can we sing the Lord's songs in a strange land? Yeah, they're taken to exile. I'll do it as a little history chart here. The north and the south kingdoms of Israel, that little pink country, split.

[20:29] Israel is the name given to the northern kingdom generally, Judah is the name given to the southern kingdom. And according to my history,

and please don't think I've got this absolutely right, it's reasonably correct, 940 BC the kingdom split and if we go down through history, in 722 BC as we reckon it, the northern kingdom got splattered by Assyria.

And in that intervening time they had 13 kings, it's very unstable. The northern kingdom is characterised by not trusting the Lord God. It's characterised by changing that, by changing the place of worship, changing the method of worship, even worshipping other gods than the true God. And it was a very unstable regime. You can do the maths, I can't do the maths while I'm standing here. But it fairly soon got knocked out. The southern kingdom lasted a lot longer, until 587 BC when they were invaded by Babylon.

And in that time, from the reign of Uzziah, 740 BC I reckoned, through the kingship of Jotham and Ahaz and Hezekiah, that's the time that Isaiah said he was prophesying.

That's right, isn't it? The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah, son of Amos, saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. It's actually quite a long time.

[22:03] It's quite a long ministry when he was the prophet. And there were various different threats, different trials, different situations, different temptations through that period.

And it looks very much as though he's addressed different parts of his prophecy to those different situations as they go on through. And he's even looking forward to the fact that they will be invaded, which is outside his own lifetime, and something else he's looking forward to as well, which I'll come to in a moment.

But he prophesied through difficult times, he had a long ministry, and he prepared his material for these different situations and circumstances. So let me just wind on a little bit further and say that after the exile, something remarkable happened.

Israel was scattered, the people were captives and slaves, and God did a sort of second exodus. And he sort of clothed himself with strength.

We're invited to think of God sort of rolling up his sleeves and his arm, working salvation for him. Don't look at my arm, because you don't get a very good idea of muscular strength from that. But the arm of the Lord worked salvation, and he did a remarkable thing, and he brought his people out of exile.

[23:31] Seventy years later, it is seventy, isn't it? Seventy years later, and they were back in the land. Quite remarkable. And God said, this is what's going to happen.

I'll even tell you the name of the king who does it. His name is Cyrus. And let me tell you something, says God. None of your idols can foretell something like that. Because your idols, because they, as we've seen, idolatry was a sort of default sin of Israel.

None of your idols can do that. You make a block of wood, you get a log, cut some of it, some of it you use on the fire to make bread, some of it you make into an idol, and then you worship the idol. You stupid, stupid people, he says. And what can your idols do about the future? Say to an idol, what's going to happen in the future? What's going to happen in the next 70 years?

And the idol says, nothing. Because the idols don't speak. But God is a speaking God, and he says, I'll tell you, I'll show you how much superior I am to the idols, because I'll tell you what's going to happen.

[24:40] In 70 years I'll bring you back, and Cyrus will be the emperor who brings you back. So that just sort of brings us up to chapter 56, because chapter 56 particularly suits the situation of people who've been brought back from exile.

And you might think, here we are, back from exile. This is everything that God has promised. but, is it?

And there is a very deep reflection. Have things really changed at all? Well, we're back in the land. But do you know, our hearts are not changed by being moved several hundred miles.

Have you noticed that? Your heart is not changed by getting on an aeroplane and landing somewhere else or going in a train and landing somewhere. It doesn't change your heart, does it? And these people had been moved from one country to another. They're back home. But the heart of the human being is not changed by geography.

[25:54] We are still sinners as we were before, he says. So I'm using an expression that the theologian Calvin used where he says the heart of man is a factory of idols.

And we're still like that. We're still like that, they say. We still find that we don't live in utopia. And Isaiah is quick to point out, you know, you still exploit people. You're still not kind to your neighbour. The heart in which God says, love God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind and your neighbour as yourself isn't manufactured, isn't produced by geography because the heart naturally says it's me first, it's what I can get.

God's going to be second and certainly other people come second. But the people are also wrestling with this, you know, God's promises are still the same.

Behold, the mountain of the Lord's house will be lifted higher than any of the other mountains and all the nations will stream to it and people will beat their swords into plough shares and they won't make war anymore.

[27:11] That's still there in the Bible. What happened to that promise? Will it ever be fulfilled? That's what they're wrestling with. Or if you bring it back to my original question, is anybody going to do anything about this?

So I just want to pick up on one thread of this and then we'll leave it for another time.

Is anybody going to do anything about this? So let me pick up on one thread of this. There is the promise of the Lord concerning Jerusalem.

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains and it will be raised above all the hills. So there's my little diagram of the Lord's house.

The temple in the city on a hill and up go the people. The nations stream to it. So as you're listening to them, some of them are speaking Bulgarian, some of them are speaking the language of Ukraine, some of them are speaking Italian and they're all saying let's go up to the Lord's house and hear what God has to say to us.

[28:21] Let's learn the way to live from him. That's what the nations are doing. Or if you bring it into the quote from Isaiah 56, and this is a significant quote, same thought expressed in this particular way, Isaiah 56, verse 8, I'm sorry, verse 7.

My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. same thought, isn't it? My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.

That's the plan of the creator of the ends of the earth, the God of Israel. All the nations will stream to this place and learn the way of the Lord.

And as we've seen, instead of that, we have almost the complete opposite. instead of the nations surrounding the city, instead, sorry, the nations surround the city with armies.

And Israel learns the ways of the nations. As it says in, as it had read to us, you are full of superstitions, full of idols, full of silver and gold, but not full of the Lord.

[29:42] But we still have this word, will. will. My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.

And there's the dilemma of it, isn't it? How is this going to be fulfilled? If God said it will, then it will.

And I'd like to fast forward to a little incident that we had read to us.

of this same young man from Nazareth and he goes to the temple.

And I've put together two texts for this. There's a John account and there's a Matthew account. The John account says this, when it was time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle, and he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables.

[30:54] To those who sold doves he said, get these out of here! How dare you turn my father's house into a market! And his disciples remembered it was written, zeal for your house will consume me.

That's the John account. Let me just add to it the Matthew account which says it this way, Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.

It is written, he said to them, my house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers. And the blind and lame came to him at the temple and he healed them.

Let's just reflect on that for a moment. my version of the temple courts. And there's this man who made a whip out of cords.

Something quite deliberate about this. And he drives out those who sell animals. And he scatters the coins of the money changers. And you can sort of imagine you can see them go chinging all over the place.

[32:02] Do you get a sense of Jesus' indignation and determination? It's a bit like, I always think it's a little bit like sometimes MPs behave badly in the house of commons and one of them goes over and seizes the mace and chucks it around or something like that and he has to be immediately arrested because you can't do that sort of thing in that sort of place.

And this is Jesus doing exactly what he shouldn't do, exactly where he shouldn't do it. He's in the temple courts, he scatters the coins of the money changers and he overturns their tables.

And he says things like, so they, the John account, they say to him, what's your authority to do this? And Jesus answers, destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days. And the Jews replied, it has taken 46 years to build this temple and you're going to raise it in three days.

But the temple he had spoken of was his body. Destroy this temple, he says, and I will raise it in three days. In Matthew, what he says is my house will be a house of prayer, but you've made it a den of robbers.

[33:33] So I ask the question again, is anybody going to do anything about this? And I'm going to say the man with the whip. Whoops, the answer lies with this man with the whip.

Because he's got the indignation and determination, hasn't he? I'm going to do something about this. And I have the authority, so he claims, to go into that place and sort it out.

He has the authority and he says, this is my father's house. Jesus says, he has the temerity to say this, I don't come in here as a random prophet.

I don't come in here as a learned rabbi. I don't come in here as a skivvy and a servant. I come in here on the business of my father.

It's his house. I'm his son. I'm sorting this out. He pays a penalty. It's alluded to in John where Jesus says, destroy this temple.

[34:43] Something's going to be destroyed. Or where he, again in John, zeal for your house will consume me. That could be taken in different ways, couldn't it?

It could be saying he's filled with zeal or it could be that zeal will eat him up and destroy him. But he suffers the penalty in Jewish history, Old Testament history, Hebrew history.

The worst thing, the most disgraceful, horrible thing that could happen is the destruction of the temple. people. That is under God's judgment.

That is awful. You hardly dare mention that. And Jesus says, do you know, that's going to be my experience. There will be a temple destruction involving me.

The temple he spoke of was his body. He was to suffer the most shameful, disgraceful, alarming fate under judgment.

[35:50] And he says, I will raise it in three days. The temple he spoke of was his body. And here is temple theology sort of taken, moved around, reoriented and exploding into fulfillment.

fulfillment. Jesus says, all the stuff that couldn't be dealt with when the temple was bricks and mortar is dealt with in me. The new temple, the temple that everybody flows to, the place where God lives, the one place where you meet God, that's me, says Jesus.

And my body is raised. And let me just say, if Jesus wasn't raised, this is all nonsense. we've wasted a huge amount of time this morning.

Because if Jesus wasn't raised, if this is nonsense, Jesus is mistaken, he's a sham, I don't know what he is, mad, bad, sad.

But if he is raised, then this all makes amazing sense. Stunning sense. And you get a little bit of this in the Matthew account where he says, he healed the blind and the lame.

[37:10] It's just a sort of throw away end of the sentence. But I think it betokens something. That the Jesus described here, the one who does something about it, is the one who not only speaks about judgment and destruction, but the one who brings healing.

And specifically, the people that he healed were the blind and the lame. That's what Israel had been complaining about. We're blind. We can't move.

We're paralyzed. And it's significantly, it's these people that Jesus heals. And I think it's not really just pointing us to Jesus' power in the medical sphere, but in the spiritual sphere.

To take away the blindness of the human eye so that we can see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And to take away the paralysis of the human soul, that we can actually live in holiness before God and actually please God and do what he wants us to do and begin to respond as he wants us to respond.

And who's, I started off saying, who's going to do something about it? And the answer that I want us to come to is the man with the whip who's done something about it.

[38:38] It's Jesus of Nazareth who's done something about it. It's him. And he was right when he said, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. The spirit of the Lord is upon me.

He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to bring, what was it, a relief to the broken hearted, release to the prisoners. He was right when he said that. He is the Lord's answer to this most urgent and impassioned of questions.

Who'll do something about it? He will. And to take this even deeper into this mystery, when he acts, it is not God getting someone else to do it instead.

It is God himself acting in Jesus and it is him alone who's doing it. And that gives us a deep clue to the real identity of who Jesus is.

So I ask the question at the beginning, who's going to do something about it? And I leave the answer, I believe that Jesus is the answer to that question. The answer for me, is my conviction, and for many people in this room, and maybe, I don't know whether it's the answer for you or not.

[39:53] If you're staying to the meal, you might like to ask around the table, who do you think Jesus is, and see what answers you get.