

Isaiah summary - group discussion

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Preacher: Philip Wells

[0:00] I've lost track of them. One going to Mars recently, I think, and investigating things like, is there life on Mars?

How did the solar system arise? People seem to be prepared to spend a lot of money finding out the answer to these questions.

And you can't help but think, and I think some of the journalists have actually put, and this will help us understand who we are, and this will help us understand, are we alone in the universe?

Is there life on Mars? I won't sing it. But why are we here? And it seems to me that behind a lot of these space missions is really that question.

We want to find out the answer to these deeper questions, not just what is Ultima Thule made of, but how did it get there, who put it there, what is it there for, what are we here for?

[1:01] And actually these questions are best answered not by spending millions and billions of dollars firing things into space, but reading in the Bible.

The answer to these questions is God. He made everything. He made us. We are not alone in the universe.

Any Sunday school student could have told you the answer to that. There are angels. There are demons. There is God. There are human beings and archangels.

We are certainly not alone in the universe. And what are we here for? There is a summary question in the Westminster Catechism which says, what is the chief end of man?

The answer being to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. That's what we're here for. You don't need to spend billions of pounds shooting rockets into space to get the answer to those questions. But let's stop for a moment this morning and think about this God who has made us.

[2:08] Let's think about this God in whose universe we live. Let's think about this God who we have been put here to glorify and enjoy, to know, to walk with, to receive from, to share with, to be in relationship with.

And I thought we were to spend a little while this morning asking the question, what's God like? Who is he? And the Bible loves to answer that question.

The Bible is full of revelation of the God, the God who made us. So we've been looking through Isaiah and it seemed like a good idea to me to ask Isaiah that question.

What sort of God is the God of the Bible? And it also seems to me that the writers of the New Testament, if you ask them, they wouldn't just answer the question from scratch.

They'd say, well, what does the Old Testament say? And in particular, they would have read the book of Isaiah and they would have got their answers from there. So let's do the same. And I want to tell you some summary points about the God of the Bible.

[3:26] Number one, he's the creator. Number two, he only is the Lord. He's incomparable. Number three, he is holy. Number four, he is the one who makes and keeps promises, the sovereign God who makes and keeps promises.

And number five, he is the redeeming God who goes to huge lengths to make his promises happen. So he's the creator. He's incomparable. He's holy.

He's sovereign. He's redeeming. And I'd like us to think about those five things together this morning. So you're going to need your Bible there to get the best out of this.

So have a Bible in front of you. He is the creator. Let's look at the way this is expressed for us. So in the passage that Christopher read to us, Isaiah 40, verse 25, this is how God speaks of himself.

To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One.

[4:42] Lift your heavens. Sorry, lift your eyes. Look to the heavens. Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls them each by name.

Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. And God invites us to look up into the sky.

I don't know whether you notice the night sky at all. At this time of year, it's the best time to be looking at the night sky. If it's clear, you can get some wonderful views of the constellations. Orion, the Pleiades, the Plough. That's all I know, actually. But it's there. And God says, have a look at that. It's amazing. Who created all these?

Well, God says, I did. And God says, I bring them out. I call them by name. Just think of that, that God knows each star by name.

[5:55] There was a program on which they speculated which is greater, the number of grains of sand on the sea or the number of stars in the sky. But whichever it is, God knows each of the stars by name.

And because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. This is a God who calls and knows the name and makes sure that they're all present.

And then God says to his people, And if I can do that for the stars, I can certainly do that for you. And the next verse says, Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel? My way is hidden from the Lord.

My cause is disregarded by my God. We are invited to think of the great creator God, whose hands, as the song says, flung stars into space.

And who is therefore so great. And as I got this from Jim Packer, not meaning that he's too big to care, but meaning that he's too great to fail.

[7:11] And we're invited to think of that as the creator God. If you went into a huge, big church with thousands and thousands of people, you might get the impression that nobody particularly knows your name.

And if you weren't there, they wouldn't particularly miss you. Whereas in a smaller church like ours, hopefully we know one another's names. And hopefully we would miss one another. And God says, well, with me, I notice if you're not there.

I know you by name. And it's that level of personal care about his people that we're invited to consider.

Look at verse 28. Do you not know, have you not heard, the Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth.

So again, he's saying this, God is the creator. And what are we to draw from that? What are we to connect that with? And he says, understand this, that the Lord does not grow tired and weary.

[8:23] He does not get poorly. He doesn't have to spend a few days in bed. He doesn't get fatigued.

He's full and ever full of energy and strength and alertness and aliveness. He does not grow tired and weary.

And his understanding no one can fathom. And the beautiful thing about this is that the Bible says that he shares his strength with his weary people.

He gives strength to the weary. He increases the power of the weak. And he gives these examples that we're familiar with. Even youths, young people, grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall.

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.

[9:30] And this great creator God shares his strength with his fragile people so that they don't fall and falter but keep on going. So that was number one.

We are told that he is the creator God. And we draw from that that he's too great to fail. And the wonder that he shares his strength with his fragile people.

Number two. He is the incomparable God. And we got this in chapter 40, verse 25, didn't we? To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?

Says the Holy One. To whom will you compare me? Now, have you ever heard this expression? When people make a wrong comparison and they say, Oh, it's like comparing apples and oranges.

Have you ever heard that expression? Oh, come on. Somebody must have done. Yeah, thank you. Two supporters at the back. You can't compare unlike things.

[10:38] God says, I am not like all the other idols and you compare me with them.

I'm a little bit better at this and the idols are a bit better at that and so on and so on. He says, I'm in a class of my own. The idols are all apples and I'm oranges, if you like.

We're completely different. We're worlds apart. His, and in the book of Isaiah, his rivals are the idols. And the idols are made up versions of God.

New Testament tells Christians to beware that they don't make up idols. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. And the way to do that is constantly to refresh our minds with what God truly is like.

So his idols, his rivals are the idols, which are metal images or wooden images or mental images.

[11:43] As soon as you hear somebody say, I like to think of God as, then you're on alert for a mental idol being made up.

Let's look at chapter 44, verse 8. And here's a long passage where Isaiah mocks human made idols.

44, verse 8. Do not tremble. Do not be afraid. You are my witnesses. Is there any God beside me? No, there is no other rock. I know not one. All who make idols are nothing. The things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind.

They are ignorant to their own shame. Who shapes a God and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing? He and his kind will be put to shame.

[12:50] Craftsmen are nothing but men. Let them all come together and take their stand. They will be brought down to terror and infamy. The blacksmith takes a tool and works it with the coals.

He shapes an idol with hammers. He forges it with the might of his arm. He gets hungry and loses his strength. He drinks no water and grows faint. The carpenter measures it with a line and makes an outline with a marker.

He roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses it. He shapes it in the form of a man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine.

He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest. He planted a pine, and the rain made it grow. It is man's fuel for burning.

Some of it he takes and warms himself. He kindles a fire and bakes bread. He also fashions a god and worships it. He makes an idol and bows down to it. Half of the wood he burns in the fire.

[13:49] Over it he prepares his meal. He roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, I'm warm. I see the fire. And from the rest he makes a god. He's idol.

He bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, Save me, you are my God. They know nothing. They understand nothing. Their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see.

Their minds closed so that they cannot understand. No one stops to think. No one has their knowledge or understanding to say, Half of it I used for fuel. I even baked bread over its coals.

I roasted meat and I ate. Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left? Shall I bow down to a block of wood? He feeds on ashes.

A deluded heart misleads him. He cannot save himself or say, Is not this thing in my right hand a lie? So the idols are human made.

[14:52] In the crude form, They are sub-personable, Sub-personal, perishable stuff. So in some cultures you will see Carved idols, Colored idols, Statues, Things made out of concrete, Things made in China, You know, in a certain way.

Made stuff. So very crude idols. In the sophisticated form, In the West, We tend not to make idols with metal, But mentally, We have a whole system of meaning and salvation, Which is to do with the universe that made itself, And runs itself, And, In which we think, There is no God, And this is actually just another form of idolatry, And people bow down and worship that, And think that that's ultimate truth.

And God says, There is not a spectrum of gods, With sort of hardly gods, And fairly gods, And not too bad gods, And nearly pretty good gods, And then, Our God is somewhere near the top of that.

He says, It's not like that at all. But there's a huge chasm, Between these idols, And these human thoughts, And God says, And me, I am in a class of my own.

He only is the Lord. He's incomparable. Oh, Would that we had eyes to see that. Don't you think? That we could see, And sense, And detect, That is the greatness of our God.

[16:37] He is incomparable. He alone is God. He is the only rock, I know no other beside. And, When we get into the New Testament, And we find people worshipping Jesus, A huge step has been taken, Hasn't it?

Because, We are not allowed to worship, Anything other than God. And when Jesus gets worshipped, It's a huge statement, About him, About the nature of God, And it's a true statement, That he is worthy of our worship.

So that was the second thing. He only is the Lord. He's incomparable. Third thing, He is the Holy One. The word, The expression, Holy One, Is used 31 times, In the Old Testament.

Of those 26 times, Is in the book of the prophet Isaiah. The Holy, It doesn't have, It's not three words in, No, It's not three words in Hebrew, It's two.

The Holy. He is the Holy. So we would have to translate it, The Holy One. Take a look at some of these references, To the Holy One.

[17:56] Isaiah 1, Verse 4. And Isaiah starts off, Sort of his, His theme.

And he addresses the nation of Israel, And says, You are a brood of evildoers, Children given to corruption. They have forsaken the Lord.

They have spurned the Holy One. Who have they spurned? The Holy One. What is his character?

He is holy. And they have turned their backs on him. Take a look at Isaiah 6, Verse 3. This vision of the Lord, High and exalted, And the train of his robe fills the temple.

And you have the seraphim there, Or the seraphs there. And you remember what they say. They say, Holy, Holy, Holy, Is the Lord Almighty.

[19:08] The whole earth, Is full of his glory. The Hebrew word is Kodesh. So it says something like, Chakodesh, Chakodesh, Chakodesh, Something like that.

It would probably say, Yahweh tetzabaioth, The Lord of hosts, Something like that. But it would sound really grand, If I could do it properly in Hebrew.

Holy, Holy, Holy, Is the Lord Almighty. Isaiah wants to, Press upon us his holiness. Chapter 12, Verse 6.

Envisages God's final plan fulfilled. Shout aloud and sing for joy, People of Zion. For great is the Holy One of Israel among you.

So what is God's holiness? Theologians have wrestled with this. I'll try and give you a little thought on it this morning. I think it is saying, What is God distinctly?

[20:24] What is the thing that makes God himself? What is the deep attributes of God? That is deep character.

And the pagan gods, Have their own sort of holiness, I'm suggesting to you. Some of the pagan gods, Perhaps their particular thing, Is their power.

They're just very powerful. So their holiness consists in power. Or some of the gods, Might be, Their particular thing is cunning. And their holiness consists of cunningness.

Some of the gods of the ancient world, Were mean and nasty. And their holiness, Their specialness, Consisted in their unreliability, And their trickiness, And their meanness.

But what is it that characterizes, The God of the Bible? So forgive me, I'm going to give you some Hebrew words again. There are these words, That are characteristically used of God, And they are deep, Beautiful words.

[21:34] They're tzedek. He is the God of righteousness. He does things right. He is the God who reacts rightly, Who treats people rightly, Who loves righteousness.

And then there is this word mishpat, A sort of royal rightness and justice. He is the God who loves mishpat. He wants mishpat on the earth.

He wants justice, Rightness, A right submission to the king. And this word hesed, Which means steadfast love.

It's a love that doesn't let go. When the Lord has promised something, He doesn't let you down. And the Lord God is full of, Steadfast love.

He is abounding in steadfast love. And there's this other word emet, Which means his faithfulness. Sometimes translated truth. So you sometimes get hesed and emet, Being steadfast love and truth, Or steadfast love and faithfulness, Or mercy and faithfulness, But those two going together.

[22:40] The fact that he can always be trusted. That if he promises you something, He is totally reliable, And is worth trusting in. Of course the response, To somebody full of faithfulness, Is to trust them.

And this, I would suggest to you, Is the holiness of God. He is these things. He is abundantly these things. He is absolutely excellent, At these things.

And when the seraphim say, Holy, Holy, Holy, Three times, They are saying, He is not just holiness squared, Holiness times holiness, But he is holiness times holiness, Times holiness, Holiness cubed.

He is on his own dimension, Of holiness. He is burningly holy, Like the angels around, Were, The seraphim like flames of fire.

And, This God, Calls us, To be holy. It's a, A constant factor, In the Bible, That, The holy God, Draws people to himself, And says, I want us to be family, I want you to be like me, I want you to learn my ways, I want you to copy my ways, I want you to become holy.

[24:03] And the New Testament, Will take that on, And say, Peter will say, Be holy, For I am holy. And, In Ephesians, Paul will say, We have been chosen, To be holy.

And, A wonderful thing for us, To be fascinated, With holiness, And preoccupied with holiness, And to seek out holiness, To say, How can we be, Holy people, Because, The Lord, Our God, Is holy. Number four, He is the sovereign God, Who makes, And keeps, Promises. So I use the word, Sovereign here, In the sense, That theology uses it, To mean, The God, Who decides things, And nobody tells him, What he has to decide, And the God, Who when he's doing something, Nobody can tell him to stop, And nobody can make him stop, So he's totally in charge, Of his decisions, And his actions, He decides, And nothing can stop him, Doing what he decides to do, And Isaiah will tell us, A lot about this, Let's just take a, A couple of examples, So, Isaiah chapter 10, And verse 12, Have a look at that, So this is, Uh, When the Assyrians, Assyrians, Swept in, Decimated, A northern kingdom, and were successful in their attack. And the Assyrians thought they were pretty cool, but the Lord said, actually, the only reason you've managed to do that is because I had decided it and I had planned it.

So Isaiah 10, 12, when the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes.

[26:15] For he says, by the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, because I have understanding. That's what he thinks. He thinks it was him.

But God says in verse 15, Does the axe raise itself above him who swings it? Or the saw boast against him who uses it?

As if a rod were to wield him who lifts it up? Or a club brandish him who is not wood? And he says it's like the carpenter.

The saw thought that it was doing it all itself, and not realized that the carpenter was holding the saw, and had decided what to do with the saw. And Assyria thinks, oh, well I decided to make this attack, and it's my power that gave me this strength.

And God says, no. It was my sovereign purpose. I decided when that would happen. I decided how far he would go, and I controlled the whole thing.

[27:19] Our God is sovereign in the affairs of the nations, and in everything else. Let's look at Isaiah 46, verse 8.

Isaiah 46, verse 8 is in the context of the next oppressor, Babylon, whom God will sort out.

And he says about the destruction of Babylon, Isaiah 46, verse 8, Remember this. Fix it in mind.

Take it to heart, you rebels.

Remember the former things those of long ago. I am God, and there is no other. I am God. There is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times what is still to come.

I say, my purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. And he goes on to say that he summons a bird of prey from the east, and he says in the end of verse 11, What I have planned, that I will do.

[28:42] It tells us about a God who is sovereign. He makes plans. Nothing stops him bringing them to pass. He can use all sorts of agents to fulfill his plans, but it's him who brings about his plan and purpose.

And we stop to ask, what is his plan and purpose? And ultimately his plan and purpose is to save his people, and to defeat the pride and irreverence of his enemies, and to bring together sinners from every ethnic group, from every tribe and tongue and nation and language, and to gather the nations to himself through Jesus Christ.

And I'm bold to say that's what he's doing this morning. And as we sit here together, different tribes, tongues, languages and nations, that the sovereign God is doing exactly what he said he will do. He will not stop our personal histories, or our ethnicity or even our sin, from bringing us to himself and gathering together his people.

He is the sovereign God who makes and keeps promises, and nothing can stop him. Where are you in that? You being gathered?

[30:06] Have you been gathered? Do you want to be gathered? Do you ask him to include you in that? Because he is the sovereign God who makes and keeps promises. And if you think you're on the outside of that, please ask him to include you.

Because he can, and he will. Fifth and final thing. He is the redeeming, rescuing God who goes to huge lengths to make his promises happen.

And Isaiah will say to us, just think about the Exodus. Think about what God did in the Exodus. Isaiah 51 verse 9.

Thinking back in generations of old, wasn't it God's arm that cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through, who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the depths of the sea?

Didn't God go to a great lengths to bring his people out of Egypt? Didn't he defeat Pharaoh? Drown his army in the sea? Didn't God part the sea so that the people could go through?

[31:16] Didn't he go to great lengths in those days? Well, he did. And will he not do the same thing again? Didn't he, in 43.3, go to great lengths?

In working internationally, 43.3, I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

I give Egypt for your ransom, or perhaps I gave Egypt for your ransom. Cush and Sheba in your stead. Aren't we thinking perhaps back to the Exodus, where in order to get his people out of Egypt, he was prepared to inflict huge casualties on Egypt.

I gave them for your ransom. I was prepared to do that. In 59.17, God, it says, clothes himself.

In 59.16, the Lord looked and was displeased. There was no justice. He saw that there was no one. He was appalled. There was no one to intervene.

[32:21] So his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness at Sedeq sustained him. He put on righteousness as his blessed plate, the helmet of salvation on his head.

He put on the garments of vengeance. He wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak. So God puts on his work clothes, because he means to get to work in saving his people and fulfilling his purposes.

He does it with vigour. And he says, I will go to great, great lengths to save my people.

And as you read the book of Isaiah, you think, I wonder what lengths he will actually go to. Because we read about the king that he will send.

And we read about the servant that he will send. And we ask, what does this show about the greatness of the lengths God will go to?

[33:23] And the New Testament will click that into place and say, do you know, this is a breathtaking, how far God will go to save his people.

And it will take, if you like, all the resources of the New Testament to click that into place. All the evidences and the statements concerning Jesus, all the mighty works that he did.

And they all build up to prove this point and to demonstrate this point of how far the Lord, the Creator, the Sovereign One, the only God, will go to redeem his people.

And how far will he go? He will go so far as himself in person to come into this world, to take up the weapons needed, to pay the price needed, to do whatever is needed, himself, to save his people.

And when we see Jesus dying on the cross, and when we see Jesus rising from the dead, we see this God himself doing this in person.

[34:42] He doesn't send somebody else to do it. He comes himself. He sends his Son. The Father sends his Son. And he works the business of salvation in person.

Breathtaking thing. So when it says, the servant of the Lord will be high and lifted up, it means it. And when it says, that the child will be wonderful counselor, mighty God, God, it means it. And it's a breathtaking thing. So, when we see these saviour figures in the book of Isaiah, in the end, God says, do you know the real identity of those people?

It's me, myself. Because I'm prepared to go to those enormous lengths to save you guys. That's something, isn't it? The servant, the highly exalted one, is the Lord himself.

The king he sends is the mighty God himself. You might remember I'd looked on some Jewish anti-Christian websites about Isaiah 53.

[35:59] And the rabbi who wrote it referred to God as Hashem. Which means, the name. So, rather than using God's name in Hebrew, Jehovah, Yahweh, in reverence, he just says, the name.

Hashem, the name. And the New Testament says, that because Jesus humbled himself and suffered, God has given him the name.

The name that is above every name. And when we see Jesus, we see Hashem, the name, the Lord, God himself. So, who is God?

We've just looked at this this morning quite briefly. He's the creator. And we draw from that, or we're meant to draw from that, he's so wise and powerful, he shares his strength with his weary people. He only is the Lord. There is no one comparable with him. He is the one who is outside the system because he made it. And all the gods inside the system are useless, and damaging, and deluded, and everything else.

[37:15] He is holy. He is totally himself. And he calls us to be fascinated and enraptured by what it is to be holy, and to seek holiness ourselves.

He is the sovereign God who makes and keeps promises. No one can stop him saving his people. And he is the redeeming God who goes to huge lengths to make his promises happen.

Breathtakingly, he comes down to earth himself in the person of Jesus Christ because he loved us. isn't that amazing?

Even to death on a cross. Let's sing together.