

Does everyone get to heaven?

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you very much. I'm going to speak about this subject, will everyone get to heaven?! Here's people, there's heaven, will everybody get there? Our culture has very strange and! contradictory views on this. So some people will say, well actually there is no heaven to get to, there's no afterlife to go to anyway, and yet other people in our culture will happily say to children about death, oh so and so has gone to be with the angels. Very contradictory about this. You might say, yeah well of course the answer is simple, there is a heaven and everyone will get there. Well our culture is very conscious where there is injustice, we say we need closure on that. We need justice for child abusers and rapists and wicked people and we're thinking, actually we don't expect them to be in heaven. We might have a view that all roads and all religions lead to heaven, but that's being ignorant, perhaps deliberately ignorant of the fact that many religions hold completely incompatible views of God and ethics and salvation and salvation and they can't all be right, can they? And in our culture there are people who are extremely choosy about foodstuffs, they're gluten free, organic, etc, etc, but are totally undiscerning about their spiritual health and spiritual intake. So I say this book that we're reading and the chapter that we had read to us, there's something very definite to say about this, very definite to say about it and he's going to say not all people go to heaven and he's going to say not all ways lead to heaven, but there is a way that leads to heaven and there's a way that does not and I want to try and convince you this morning to take the way that leads to heaven.

I want to try and explain what it is and I want to try and convince you to take that way. There's a way that does lead there and a way that does not and you can see that if you turn to the last couple of sentences that were read to us where God says, peace, I will heal them. He says that in verse 19. So there's some people who get peace and get healed and then there's a famous verse that you might even have quoted yourself without even realising where it comes from. There's no peace for the wicked, says the Lord. Have you ever quoted that without realising it comes from the Bible? There's no peace for the wicked. And I would like to try and take us through this chapter as concisely as I can, but it will take a little while to do it. Three headings. Number one, the ridiculous blindness of the watchman. Number two, the rubbish refreshment of the idols.

And number three, the remarkable revival of the humble. So you've got a few, capital R, ridiculous blindness, rubbish refreshment and remarkable revival. Let me just, for people who've been coming to these talks for a while, just put this into context. That was our bit of history. You remember the two kingdoms and the, as Isaiah prophesies, the northern kingdom has been attacked by Assyria and the southern kingdom is going to be destroyed by Babylon. And then there's going to be this remarkable return when the people come back into the land and this almost miraculous really return from exile. And the question you'll remember that the exiles would have in their mind is, we were sent into exile for our sin and unfaithfulness and has anything changed by being in exile? Has that changed us at all? We're back in the land, but do you know, does it change the heart? The heart of human beings is a factory of idols, as I'll quote that again later. Has anything changed? People still don't put other people first, they oppress and exploit, and we'll probably see that in the forthcoming chapter. But God's promises are still the same.

Have they, have they been fulfilled? Will they be fulfilled? And is anybody going to step in and make this happen? So that's just to give us the context. Ladies and gentlemen, we've been coming along for a while, that's where we're fitting in. And we'll go and see what Isaiah says now in chapter 56 verse 9 to about the ridiculous blindness of the watchman. So he calls on aggressive powers, probably meaning foreign countries, to come and decimate. Come all you beasts of the field, come and devour all you beasts of the forest. Come and tear them up. Well, who are they going to tear up?

[5 : 07] The watchman. This is addressed to the leaders and teachers of the people. That's who the watchmen are. The leaders are supposed to lead people to heaven. They're supposed to block the way to destruction.

They're supposed to do so with integrity, even at cost to themselves. And that's the sort of people, current day, vicars, priests, rabbis, bishops, imams, gurus, inspirational speakers.

Because that's the sort of person Isaiah is addressing. And these people, he says, what sort of job are you doing? Israel's watchmen are blind. They lack knowledge. So he could say to these people, are you leading people to heaven? And they say, well, actually, no. Because we're blind, we can't see the way. That's what it says. Israel's watchmen are blind. They all lack knowledge.

And you could say to the watchmen, and you yourselves, do you know the way to heaven? And they'd say, no, actually, we don't know where we're going ourselves. It says it there in verse 10, doesn't it? They lack knowledge. They lack knowledge. They don't know what they're talking about. It's like people with a telescope who actually can't see. They're watchmen, but they don't even know where the telescope is. Are you alert, watchmen, to danger and ready to defend your people?

[6 : 37] And the answer is no. We are mute dogs that cannot bark. If you have a watchdog that can't bark, useless, isn't it? It's a ridiculous dog that can't bark. And what are you doing then?

You're the experts, aren't you? Well, we're experts. What does he say? We're experts at doing our own thing.

I'm sorry, I've missed out a verse. It says, they lie around and dream and they love to sleep. That's what these watchmen do. It's not what watchmen should do, is it? They lie around and dream and love to sleep. They are dogs with mighty appetites. They never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding. They all turn to their own way. Each seeks his own gain. Come, each one says, let's get wine and drink our fill with beer. So, I haven't gotten wine, but I've got beer. And they have mighty appetites. They're real heroes. It's a sort of warrior word. Heroes. We're heroes at eating a lot.

And we might say to Isaiah, well, you're being a bit unfair, aren't you? Because this is a blip. There's just a few exceptional rogues, rogue watchmen, rogue leaders. And if you look, you'll see how many times he uses the word all. Verse 10. Israel's watchmen are blind. They all lack knowledge. Verse, they are all mute dogs. Verse 10. I think it's in verse 11. They all turn to their own way. Each one seeks his own gain. Come, each one cries, let me get wine. Let us drink our fill of beer. And of course, the whole matter of the future, they can't tell the future. They're not prepared for the future.

[8 : 43] They just say, it's great. And tomorrow will be great as well. Now, our culture has lost a lot of the deference for priests and religious leaders that there used to be.

But what Isaiah says is not wasted breath, is it? There are still many, many religious leaders, priests, gurus, teachers who are like this. They are blind watchmen. They cannot tell their people what to avoid. They do not know the way to heaven. They are useless. Please don't listen to them. There are still plenty of religious leaders who will not lead people to heaven. Does everybody get to heaven? No, they don't. Do all religious leaders teach the way to heaven? No, they don't.

Ridiculous blindness. And let's just notice what Isaiah goes on to say to the leaders and teachers. He says, you know, in your society, there are good people. Verse 57. The righteous perish. No one ponders it. Devout men are taken away. And no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil.

Those who walk uprightly enter into peace. They find rest as they lie in death. There are righteous people, he says. They're not necessarily the publicly recognized leaders and teachers.

[10 : 11] These people do live good lives. And they rest in peace. That's what it says, isn't it? They find rest as they lie in death. Verse 2. And they're spared from evil. This is one of the reasons that they're not here, because they're spared the evil that's going on. But they're largely unnoticed.

The righteous perish and no one ponders it in his heart. Devout men are taken away and no one understands. People are taken away. Society doesn't realize what they're lacking until it's too late. And I sort of wonder whether that's a comment on the USA upcoming election. Where are the men and women? I mean, in a country that big, there ought to be multiple men and women of integrity, honesty, spirituality, that can lead. And you might disagree with my politics on this, but I think they're very much lacking. And I think they're lacking in our UK politics as well.

The righteous are taken away and no one realizes. It's a terrible state to quietly get ourselves into. But here we are with the ridiculous blindness of these leaders. Will they take everyone to heaven? No, they won't. Let's go on to the next bit, which is the rubbish refreshment of the shrines, of the idols. G.K. Chesterton said, when people stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe anything. He had a very good turn of phrase, G.K. Chesterton. Same chap who does the Father Brown books and stories. People stop believing in God. They don't believe in nothing. [12:04] They believe in anything. Superstitions, bizarre things, anything. And Isaiah is describing in these next verses a society that has lost its faith in God and turned to all sorts of things, turned to make-believe.

Make-believe is when you say, when a person says, I like to think of God as X, Y, Z. That's make-believe.

I like to think of God as such and such. I like to think of God as nothing more than a children's story. That's make-believe. That's make-believe.

The ancient societies had idols that were metal images. Our society has mental images. Just one letter different, but it's the same thing. And in the advanced present, we are still as spiritually foolish as all those people written about a long time ago. The ancient folly of saying, I like to think of God as such, without letting God tell us what he's like.

The French theologian Calvin said, the human heart is a factory of idols. He said that in 1559, and it's still true. The natural, or it comes naturally to us, the natural capacity to replace the invisible, uncreated, higher authority who reveals himself with a visible God within human grasp to fulfil human needs and aspirations. A God that's pretty much the same size as us.

[14:00] That's an idol. And here we have these people making idols. So verse 3 says, But you, come here, you sons of a sorceress, you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes.

Whom are you mocking? At whom do you sneer and stick out your tongue? Are you not a brood of rebels, the offspring of liars? You burn with lusts amongst the oaks and under every spreading tree, and you sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags. Now what he's referring to is idol worship in the shrines and idols that have been put up in the various groves and valleys and orchards around. And he puts it as in terms of prostitution. Prostitution being intimacy outside the boundaries that we were made for. And so he talks about sons of a sorceress, offspring of adulterers and prostitutes. He talks about burning with lust. He says this is the way human beings relate to their idols. So there's a tree and there's the sorceress and her child. And it's a sort of worship embedded in what you might call nature or creation. And that becomes places of worship, the trees and the ravines.

And he talks about offspring and he talks about brood and he talks about oaks and ravines. And in verse 7, he talks about the high and lofty hill. And he talks about children in verse 5. And the thing, the unpleasant repulsive thing is that the children are sacrificed. This is the inhumanity and the, yeah, the corrupted nature of worship when it gets fixed to things in this creation instead of the creator himself. It's like adultery. Verse 8, behind your doors and your doorposts you have put your pagan symbols. Forsaking me, you uncovered your bed, you climbed into it and opened wide. You made a pact with those whose beds you loved. You looked on their nakedness. And he's talking about idolatry, linking up in this sort of adulterous way with foreign gods and idols. The rubbish refreshment of the shrines. And what they're doing is they're engaging their lives, linking their lives to this lie, this untruth, this thing that is not the real God and making a very solemn commitment. It has very deep repercussions. You see it in verse 9 where it says, you descended to the grave itself. That's what you were doing. You were engaging your lives with death.

And the funny thing is that in a sense it worked because it says in verse 10, you found renewal of your strength. You were wearied by your ways, verse 10, but you would not say it is hopeless. You found renewal of your strength and so you did not faint.

[17:16] Now, one of the things that the God of Isaiah does is he says those who rest in me, those who wait for me, will renew their strength. But these people seem to have renewed their strength with their idols.

You found renewal of your strength and did not faint. And of course that's true. It's realistic. There is such a thing as false hope and the comfort and strength that comes from the wrong place and leads to the wrong place is rubbish refreshment. You got refreshment, you got strength, but it was rubbish. It won't lead you to heaven. It will just keep you going in a completely different way.

So, I think it's common for people to have a God who is a God of indifference. So, people can say to themselves, there's other people a lot worse than me.

Well, that would only make sense if the God before whom they are living is a God who's relatively indifferent. That's not the real God, that's an idol. Or to have a God who is a God without judgment. And we think, ah, we live life, as Chris was saying, we don't have to be serious about it. Sort of easy come, easy go, it'll all sort itself out. That's a God, that only makes sense if we're living under a God who has no judgment, a God who does not say, I will assess your life when you come to the end.

[18 : 59] I will judge you. That's the real God. That's the real situation. Or the idea that if God can't be seen, that he therefore can't exist.

That's not logical. That's a made-up God. And not the true God. So, the rubbish refreshment of the shrines or of the idols.

And God has something to say about this. He says it in verse 11. He says, Whom have you so dreaded and feared that you have been false to me, and have neither remembered me, nor pondered this in your hearts?

Is it not because I have long been silent that you do not fear me? I will expose your righteousness and your works, and they will not benefit you.

When you cry out for help to your collection of idols, sorry, when you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you. And God says, Am I a non-entity?

[20 : 08] Who have you so dreaded and feared that you have been false to me? Am I a non-acting God? So, there was no exodus, he says to his ancient people.

There was no incarnation, he says to us. Was there no cross? Was there no resurrection? Am I God that does nothing? Am I a non-speaking God?

Was there no Moses? Were there no prophets? Is there no Jesus who has spoken from God? Have I said nothing? And then he says to people, Are you ethically and in any sense able to stand on your own?

He says, verse 12, I will expose your righteousness and your works. They will not benefit you. Do you honestly think that you've led such a good life, such a virtuous life, that that will stand in it, so that you'll be able to stand on the virtue of that before God, say, look, I've done okay.

Would you not in your conscience say, actually, I've failed in many ways, even my own standards I haven't kept. Are you ethically able to stand on your own?

[21 : 37] I will expose, says God, your tzedakah, your righteousness and your works. And when you cry out, as you surely will, I need help, I need somebody to help me stand, I need somebody to get me right with God, when you cry out for help, let your collection of idols save you.

Will they save you? Absolutely not. On the last day, who's going to take any comfort from asking Professor Dawkins to save them?

Stand before God. Professor Dawkins, you wrote all those good books saying that this God doesn't exist. Will you save me now? Professor Dawkins won't be able to do that. Mr. Internet Guru that I've watched, where you've claimed how I can do this and do that and meditate this way and meditate that way, can you now save me on the day when I meet God face to face on the last day?

No, he can't save you, she can't save you. And the great leaders of the world, Julius Caesar, Karl Marx, the head of state in China, who insists that everybody says how great he is, on the last day, will you be able to save me before God?

Absolutely not. Let your collection of idols save you. They're rubbish. They provide rubbish refreshment. But God says, I have another, there is another way.

[23 : 14] That, they won't lead you to heaven, the idols won't lead you to heaven. But notice verse 13. The man who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain.

You notice the, it is, he's not pointing people to a thing or a technique, he is saying, you must make me your refuge. He points to himself as a person.

Make me your refuge. If you make me your refuge, Old Testament language, you will inherit the land, you will possess my holy mountain. What a wonderful promise.

If you take your refuge in me, says God, you will have everything. You will be secure. You will be safe. It will be well with your soul.

And there's a, so there is a way to heaven. There is one who leads to heaven. But it's not a man made, it's not something made up by, I like to think of God as, it is God saying, this is who I am.

[24 : 21] This is what I'm like. So the rubbish refreshment of the idols, of the shrines where the idols were. Thirdly, the remarkable revival of the humble.

So does everybody get to heaven? No, they don't. But this person does. And let's look at this person of whom God speaks here. The Bible systematically strips away all human-based hope. Not so as to remove hope altogether. But rather to direct hope solidly to the one who alone is strong enough for a human soul to lean on for eternity.

There is someone who is strong enough to carry us through to eternity, to take us to heaven for sure. And that's who our hope is to be put in. Jesus said, trust in God, trust also in me. He's the focal point of that trust in the Bible. But this, we're looking here at what Isaiah says, so I'll take it the Isaiah way. There is a road home. Verse 14, build up, build up, prepare the road, remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.

[25 : 28] Build up the road. There is a way. There is a way. And get the obstacles out of the way, the stumbling blocks, quite possibly, all the stuff, the rubbish that was put there by the blind guides.

Get rid of that, unthink that, unlearn that, unlearn me, says the Lord. And what does he say? Well, remarkable things. Verse 15, this is what the high and lofty one says, he who lives forever, whose name is holy.

I live in a high and holy place. So this is what the high and lofty one says, who obdies eternally. Verse 13, whose name is holy.

In the holy and high I dwell, he says. There's the Lord in his highness and holiness. Forget about the high hills.

Think of God in his exalted highness. And here's the surprising bit. I live up there, far above you guys.

[26 : 35] My ways are higher than your ways. My thoughts are higher than your thoughts. But I also live with people. Specific people.

And here he says who it is. I live, verse 15, with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit to revive the spirit of the lowly to revive the heart of the contrite.

I dwell also with the contrite and lowly. There's a contrite guy. Lowly. To cause to live the spirit of the lowly.

Cause him to live. To cause to live the heart of the contrite. And he goes on, verse 16, I will not accuse forever, nor will I be always angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me, the breath of man that I have created.

He says, I won't be eternally and always at odds with everybody. I will not always be angry. I was angry, he says. Verse 17, I was enraged by his sinful greed.

[27 : 43] I punished him and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways. I have seen his ways. So he's not saying, there are some people who are actually quite good. He's not saying that.

He's not saying there are some people who are good enough by themselves. He's not saying that. He's saying, I know they're all sinners. They all fall short of the glory of God.

None of them can stand on their own merits. None of them. But, I will lift some of these people.

And which people will I lift? Well, it's what he says, the contrite and the lowly. I will revive, what does he say? The heart of the contrite.

Yeah, that's right. The spirit of the lowly and the heart of the contrite. So, there's a key there, isn't there? Who are these people? How can I become one of those people?

[28 : 43] What is it like to be one of those people? I will lead, it says, there's wonderful promises here. Let me just get the right verse. It's in verse 18.

I will heal. I will guide. I will restore comfort to this person, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel.

It's such a terrific promise, isn't it? To say of a human soul, you, dear people, I'm going to heal. You, I'm going to guide.

You, I'm going to restore comfort. You, I'm going to put it so that you are full of gratitude and praise to me. I'm going to do that. I am the high and lofty one.

But I dwell with these people and we need to focus and work out what they are. I'll heal them. I'll bring peace to them, he says. This is the remarkable revival of the humble.

[29 : 49] I just want to focus on exactly what he said about these people. So, I want us to be quite clear. Not all roads lead to heaven. Not all teachings teach the way to heaven.

But there is a way to heaven and here it is. There is a road home, the remarkable revival of the humble and we're told two things, particularly about this person who is on the right road. Number one, they're contrite. Yep, verse 15. I live with him who is contrite. What does contrite mean?

It means somebody who knows that they've sinned and asks for forgiveness. Yep, it's somebody who says, Lord, I've done wrong.

in the words of the prayer book, we have sinned, there is no health in us. We're not good. We're not good people.

[30 : 48] We cannot stand on our own goodness. I have sinned, I ask for forgiveness. This takes a degree of moral self-awareness. Not everybody has this.

God gives it. So it's a moral responsibility because it's an easy thing to say, well, my sin is other people's fault because the way I was brought up and what I was taught when I was little, it's not my fault.

And God says, well, it is your fault. What you do wrong is your fault. And it's easy to let ourselves off. I don't know whether you have a vocabulary for doing this. You can say, da, da, da, da, da.

You know, he beeped at me on the motorway when I was overtaking on the inside. But that's his problem. You know what I mean? We let ourselves off and say, that's somebody else's problem. It's like, the key, I'm told, to solving an alcohol problem is first of all, accepting that you've got a problem.

And Jesus put it this way in one of his parables. He said, the person who goes home right with God is the person who comes to God and says, God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

[31 : 55] Yeah? Do you remember the story where there's two guys go up to the temple and one says, well, not too bad. I do pretty good things, actually. I tithe, I da, da, da, da, da. And this other chap who says, actually, from top to toe, I need God's forgiveness.

Full stop. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. And Jesus says, that's the one who went home right because he was contrite. The contrite.

That, so number one, we learn this person's contrite. And number two, we learn this person is humble. to revive the heart of the contrite, to revive the spirit of the lowly.

So, I'm equating lowly with humble in this case. I think it doesn't have the word humble there. Lowly in spirit, the spirit of the lowly. Yeah, well, I'll take the word humble and lowly to mean the same thing.

What's being humble and lowly in this context? I'd like to suggest that what it is, is not standing on I. So, not standing on I.

[33 : 05] The, one of the Christianity explained courses says, it begins this way. If you got to the gate of heaven and you were asked why should you be let in?

If you would begin your answer by saying, because I, you have not understood. If you begin your answer by saying, because Jesus died for me, you got it.

And here it is in this humility. It's not standing on I. So, the humble, lowly person in this sense does not say, I come here because of my achievements.

I stand on my achievements. The humble, lowly person does not come to God and stand on my good life. The humble person does not come and stand on something like that but say, well I have a jovial personality.

Here's one for Christian people. The humble person does not stand before God because of my ministry. The humble, lowly person does not stand before God because of my feelings.

[34 : 21] The humble, lowly person comes to God and stands because of what he is, what he has done, and in particular what Jesus has done. I stand because you have promised.

I stand because of your grace, because you have shown me favour that I do not deserve. I stand before you because somebody else has done for me something I could never do for myself, paid for my sin.

That's Jesus. I stand on what he has done for me. And in this chapter it talks about healing, so it's the fact that you have healed me.

And there's that promise, I will heal, I will guide, I will restore, I will comfort.

What wonderful promises. Who wouldn't want that? To be healed by the Lord, to be guided by the Lord, to be restored by the Lord, to have comfort that no one can take away, and to have peace as it promises again in verse 19, peace to the far off, to the near, I will heal them, says the Lord.

[35 : 33] And I say, why not you? Why could that not be you? Why could that not be you? So I asked the question at the beginning, will everyone get to heaven?

Thank you for your patience and listening, I know it's quite a long talk, isn't it? Will everyone get to heaven? And my answer is, some will. It could be you.

Don't listen to the ridiculous watchman, listen to God. Don't draw strength from the rubbish refreshment of made up idols, that won't get you anywhere.

But come to God in the way it's described here as the contrite and humble calling upon him for his grace. And I also say, don't put it off to tomorrow.

Why can't it be now? Why can't you approach God, sort that out with him before you leave this room today? He promises peace to the far and the near.

[36 : 40] That's what the promise is. He says, I will heal, but here's the warning, will everyone get to heaven? No. The last verses, the last words, there is no peace for the wicked.

We're going to sing a song together to close. It's number six. Thank you.