

The big picture

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[0 : 00] Thank you very much indeed, Ben. Let me just say as we get ourselves together that I'm I'm minded to look as a series into the book of the prophet Isaiah. It's a very big book.

So we're just sort of getting our thoughts together in these few weeks before launching in. So that's the sort of thing we're doing this morning. And my introduction is to say you need a big God when there is crisis and threat and uncertainty. You need a big God.

There is an occasion where the king of a precarious and declining kingdom found that a cruel, powerful, uncompromising enemy had invaded and invaded and came to the very gates of the king's city.

I don't know whether you could possibly imagine yourself in a situation like that. It's all down to you. You're the king. The army is coming. What are you going to do? How do you feel?

That's one of the things that happened in the book of Isaiah. And the right thing for the king to do was to remember that he had a great big God.

[1 : 32] Most of us are not kings. Most of us don't have political power. But all of us face the possibility of the sudden onslaught of circumstances, unpleasant surprises, nice surprises perhaps, life.

And if you're a Christian, you have an enemy who will play dirty tricks and is out to get you. We too face crisis and threat. And the way to do it is to remember that we have a great big God.

So if you have to go A&E;, we pray none of us will. But in life, Christians go to A&E; too.

Or even when the washing machine breaks down and we're all thrown into a complete frantic tis and we need to remember we have a great big God. Well, we're going to look at the book which talks about a great big God. And it's a big book, so I'm a little bit apprehensive about how we tackle it.

One lovely, dear commentator on the book of the prophet Isaiah, Alec Mateer, I'm pretty sure I heard him once say that reading the book of Isaiah is like a tiny mouse trying to eat a huge but nourishing cheese. So there's a huge cheese and there's a tiny mouse. And you can imagine the mouse thinking, well, how am I going to eat all this? Where do I start? You've got to start somewhere.

[3 : 23] You do need some sort of plan. So we will have a little bit of a plan this morning. The problem with giving an overview, I'm not going to give you an overview of a cheese, I'm going to give you an overview of the book, is that the possibility is that it leaves us weightless and impactless.

Weightless, we haven't actually come to grips with any of the weightiness of the exact book. And impactless, and we go away and think, well, I've just got this big, massive whirlwind tour and I didn't really get any impact from any of it. So I'm conscious that that's one of the problems.

But we'll have a go, nevertheless, at talking about the whole book and saying it has a big history, it's about a big project, it contains big saviors who actually all turn out to be more or less the same person. And it is about a big God. So those four things we'll look at this morning as God helps us. A big history, a big project, big saviour and a big God. So let's start off with the big history.

I'm going to take a verse to sort of get us into each of these topics. So if you still have your Bible there, it would be helpful if you could turn to the very beginning of Isaiah, where it says, Isaiah chapter 1, verse 1, where it says, The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah, son of Amos, saw during the reigns of Isaiah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. So the book starts off with a specific historical and geographical reference. And I'd like us to do the geography and the history just to get going. So this is, that's Cyprus, this is the Mediterranean, and that is Jerusalem around there. So let's think of the places. So there's Jerusalem,

God's headquarters. Jerusalem is the particular city that in the Old Testament God focused His promises on. He particularly worked with that one city. Let's not say any more than that at the moment.

[5 : 57] Another important place on this map is Egypt. And Egypt is important because it was the place where God's people were taken into slavery. So you, I'm sure, will know the story of the Exodus.

But the people were taken into, they became slaves here. And God said, I'm going to set you free. I'm going to give you a promised land. You'll no longer be slaves. And in a long, complicated way, they came to this promised land over here. And they came despite Pharaoh, king of Egypt, wanting to keep them. And the crisis came when they killed the Passover lamb. And before the Passover lamb was killed, they couldn't leave. And after the Passover lamb was killed, they couldn't stay. And it's a sort of prefiguring of Jesus, the lamb who delivers us from sin and brings us home. Anyway, Egypt. And Egypt comes into the book of Isaiah because they promise to help or they offer to help Jerusalem and Judah. And that's a very tempting offer to get strength from Egypt. This is now Assyria, capital Nineveh. And that's the army that comes down and expands its borders and comes right up to the gates of Jerusalem to attack. So there's a big threat, a rising aggressive superpower, an attacker. But the book looks even further on in history than that to the rise of the rise of the rise of the rise of another great power, Babylon, capital Babylon.

And they are the ones who in the end succeed in attacking Jerusalem, destroying it, taking away its people. And Isaiah looks, has that in mind and looks forward, looks to see that happening and to see God doing the same sort of thing that he did regarding Egypt, getting people out of that slavery. So that's the history that is in mind. And Isaiah's ministry stretches over, I think I'm correct in saying 50 years, those kings, Isaiah, Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah. All through those reigns, Isaiah is prophesying. And his book addresses the crises and tests and challenges that are faced during those years. But it would be a mistake to think that the book of Isaiah only refers really to a 50-year period. Please look to me, look with me at Isaiah 51 verse 2.

Where God, through the prophet, references way back in history, Abraham, and says, Isaiah 51 verse 2, look back in history to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him, he was but one. And I blessed him and made him many. And he says, look what I did right back in the beginning of my plans. I just took one man and his wife. And from then, I made many, many people.

[10 : 00] And God says, you look back in history all that way. That's the sort of God I am. That's the sort of God I can, that's the sort of things I can do. And then he goes on to say, the Lord will surely comfort Zion and look with compassion on all her ruins. And in Isaiah 51 verses 9 and 10, he says, look back to the Exodus. In your present crisis, look back. Isaiah 51 verse 9 says, awake, awake, clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the Lord. Awake as in days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through? Rahab signifies Egypt as a monster, sort of personified as Egypt? The arm of the Lord devastated that great power. Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, and made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over? Didn't you take the people from Egypt through the sea and bring them home? He says, think way back.

Think what God did. He's the same God. His arm has not lost its power. Awake, awake, arm of the Lord.

You see? He looks right back. And he looks right forward. Isaiah 25 verse 8. Isaiah 25. If I start in verse 7, he says, on this mountain, he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations. He will swallow up death forever.

The sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces. You thought that was only in the New Testament, didn't you? You thought that was in the book of Revelation. Well, it's in the Old Testament.

It's in the book of Isaiah. He's quoting. The book of Revelation is quoting this. Looking right forward, what will God do? He will swallow up death forever. He will wipe away the tears from all faces.

[12 : 35] So the history looks right back and it looks right into the future. It's a big, big history. It's a big history. Good for us to have something of that perspective.

So often, all we can think about is, I've got dentist appointment at 10 o'clock. Then I've got to have coffee with somebody at 11 o'clock. I need to get that thing finished, handed in by the week after next.

All we think of is just one day after another. Now, in a sense, the Lord says, just think of one day. You can't cope with thinking about too much. Sufficient that each day has enough troubles of its own.

But in another way, we should think big. We should think big. We should think, what's God been doing back in the past? What has he got in store in the future? Healthy and helpful for us to have a big perspective. Sometimes our perspectives are ridiculously unrealistic. I quite like some of these house building programs. I really love grand designs. But sometimes I feel sad for those people. If that was all they were looking for, was to have a granite worktop and triple glazed Icelandic windows and cedar cladding. If that was really all they were looking forward to, what a small view that is.

Have they got no idea that one day God will abolish death forever and wipe away every tear from all eyes? That's the perspective we should have. So that was my first point. There was a big history. [14:21] Second point, a big project. So will you now turn with me to Isaiah 2 verse 1, just to give a sample of this. Just a little taste, a little lick of the cheese here. Isaiah 2 verse 1. This is what Isaiah son of Amos saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains. It will be raised above the hills and all nations will stream to it.

Just take that little sample sentence there. Remember that this is set in the context of threat and attack and the view of exile.

And God says, this is my project. The mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains.

It will be raised above the hills. I've driven some hills there. I think they're in, where did I say that was? Bernie's Oberland. If you're sitting wondering where on earth is that? Somewhere in Switzerland.

Higher than the mountains in Switzerland. More important than Switzerland, meaning to say. So there's the mountain of the Lord's house. And there's the city that contains the house.

[16:01] The city, not specifically mentioned in that verse, but mentioned in many other places. He has a view of this city of God that is in decline and under threat, but will be secure and beautiful.

And there's the temple in the middle of the city. The temple is the place where God meets his people. The promise is that God will not be absent from his people, but be present with his people. And this mountain, this hill is raised up, and I take it as being suggestive of God's work in the whole environment.

And the international reach of this kingdom as people from all nations climb up the hill and want to meet God in his temple.

Isn't it fantastic that we are blessed in Brighton with a cosmopolitan group of people, that even in this very room there are people from many different tribes and tongues and nations.

[17:13] And we've all come together this morning around the Lord and his son Jesus Christ, who is the king who reigns. This is God's big project.

And it will happen, it says, in the last days, verse 2. That's the days where we live in. We live in the last days. The last days are between Jesus' going to heaven and Jesus' return from heaven.

These are the last days. And God's doing this, isn't he? Even as we sit here this morning, this project is being fulfilled. It isn't finished, but it is being fulfilled.

It's a project about a community of people. That's what a city is. It's about people. It's not first about architecture.

It's about the people who live in the city. It's about the house in which God lives, that God is with us. And in the New Testament, we are told to pray so that when we meet together, if somebody comes in, hasn't been into a church before, that they would say, truly God is here.

[18:33] And we prayed that prayer this morning. Maybe not in those exact words, but we prayed for that this morning. The mountain hints at a renewed cosmos.

And I want to tell you that the scope of the project that Isaiah sees is a new heaven and a new earth, where death is done away. There's no crying and tears.

And the nation speaks of the global international reach of this project. And it is a huge, big project, isn't it?

What God has in mind is a big, big project. And in this place that's described in Isaiah chapter 2, it says, He will judge between the nations.

They will beat their swords into plowshares. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. It talks about the peace that reigns within the community of God.

[19 : 35] And we trust and we pray that we have at least some of this as a church. It's a place where we have peace and harmony and working together.

We don't get it perfectly in this world, but we seek it that God's peace reign amongst us. It's a big project.

And we are part of this big project. Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of hell won't prevail against it. That's this big project.

Taking place across the world. God is reaching out and bringing people to himself.

And the city is the city that we belong to. Yeah, we live here in Brighton. And for some of us, it's a temporary home.

[20 : 45] For some of us, this is our permanent home. But it's a truer statement that for Christians, our home is in heaven. We belong to the Jerusalem that is above.

And she is our mother, says Paul in Galatians 4. And in the book of Revelation, it says, I will write on the believer the name of the city of my God. We are citizens of this heavenly city.

We're not at home, but one day we will be there. And the wisdom of the Bible is that only by setting our minds on the heavenly city, on the future, can we live here on earth usefully, spiritually, sensibly.

Paul says, set your minds not on the things on earth, but on the things of heaven where Christ is at the right hand of God. The believers in the Old Testament survive because they set their hopes, not on earth, but on the promises of God.

And we're to do the same thing. Yeah, for sure we have duties and responsibilities here. We do.

And worries and concerns, yes. But don't let that be the boundary.

[22 : 12] That's ever as far as we get. Let's look beyond that. Let's realize that there's more at stake than we can see with our earthly eyes. It's a big project.

That was my second point. My third point. The book of Isaiah contains big saviors. Isaiah 4, verse 2, in fact.

Would you like to look at Isaiah 4, verse 2? In Isaiah 4, verse 2, it says, In that day, the branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land will be the pride and glory of the survivors in Israel.

Those who are left in Zion, who remain in Jerusalem, will be called holy. All who are recorded among the living in Jerusalem. I'll just stop there, so we're just getting a taste of that.

And that's a couple of sentences that raise as many questions as they answer. In that day. When's that day? The branch of the Lord. What's this branch going to be?

[23 : 27] What's the fruit of the land? How does this relate to the survivors that it talks about? Who is this branch? Well, let's draw a branch. One of the things that Isaiah describes is Jerusalem being chopped down, and all its structures being chopped down.

And in particular, the king and the royal line being chopped down. And it says that, actually, there's a big difference between the way God chops at those foreign nations, because he chops them never to rise again.

But with his own people, yes, sometimes he does chop them, uses other nations to chop them. But he doesn't kill them off completely.

A branch will rise. And the branch will rise and grow. I think that's the branch that's being described in chapter 4, verse 1.

In that day, the branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious. And maybe he's talking about a particular person and calling this person a branch.

[24 : 45] If you look into chapter 11, verse 1, then the branch becomes a person.

Chapter 11, verse 1, A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. Jesse would be the royal family of David, the king.

That's what it means there. A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse. From his roots, a branch will bear fruit. So this sounds like a person, doesn't it?

A prince, an inheritor of the royal line. Maybe it's Aragorn, son of Arathorn, that sort of thing, isn't it?

And it says of this branch person, The spirit of the Lord will rest on him.

The spirit of wisdom and of understanding. The spirit of counsel and of power. The spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. And he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

[25 : 49] And here's somebody, somebody, This sort of key person who is going to arise from the stump, From the cut-off stump.

This branch that shoots up. And this branch is going to be the key. He will, it says, well, all sorts of things about him.

Righteousness will be his belt, The faithfulness, the sash around his waist. So we've got the branch. And you perhaps can remember from mentally thinking of things you've read in Isaiah.

Don't we get readings from Isaiah at Christmas where it says something like this? Where it says, For unto us a child is born, Unto us a son is given, And the government will be on his shoulders, And he will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace, Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.

Don't we read that at Christmas? I think we do, don't we? And he's in the book of Isaiah. The child who will be king. A fantastic saviour figure described here.

[27 : 04] And then there's another saviour figure. And you might remember this. And you think, oh, that's in Isaiah 2, isn't it? The one of whom it says, Behold, my servant will act wisely.

He took up our infirmities. This is Isaiah 53, verse 4. And carried our sorrows. Yet we considered him stricken by God, Smitten by him and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. That's all in Isaiah 53.

I'm just giving you a little taste of that. Here is a saviour. Here he's called the servant of the Lord. And there's other figures.

Isaiah 63, verse 3, for example. The one who conquers and says, I have trodden the winepress alone from the nations.

[28 : 13] No one was with me. I trampled them in my anger. I trod them down in my wrath. Blood spattered my garments. I stained all my clothing. For the day of vengeance was in my heart.

And the year of redemption has come. It's a very strong, conquering saviour. Now, these people are all in the book of Isaiah.

And you think, oh, I'd like to get to grips with what it says about these powerful, wonderful people in this book.

And the wonderful trick of the New Testament, if I put it that way, is that all of them are Jesus. Jesus looked at that book and said, it's all about me. I'm in there from one end of it to the other. It isn't as though there's just little, there's a bit there that's about Jesus and a bit there that's about Jesus.

[29 : 16] The whole thing is about him. And he's the one who clicks it all into place. He's the branch that springs up.

He's the child who would be king. The virgin will conceive and be with child. He's the one who, of whom it says the government will be upon his shoulders.

He's the servant of the Lord who bore the punishment for our sins. He was bruised for our iniquities. He's the one who brings all his enemies under his feet.

I'm just giving you a taste of this big, big book. This is the fourth thing. A big God.

Turn please to Isaiah chapter 6, verse 1. That's another verse to get a taste of.

[30 : 19] In the year that King Isaiah died. So just point out that King Isaiah had been a stable king and now everything's uncertain because he dies.

In the year that King Isaiah died. I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted.

And the train of his robe filled the temple. And above him were seraphs, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces.

With two they covered their feet. With two they were flying. And they were calling to one another, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory.

And I want to say that it's an encounter with a big God. I saw the Lord high and lifted up.

[31 : 31] And, you know, the outskirts, the train of his robe, the bits of him that weren't important, as it were, filled the temple. And the impact of this vision on Isaiah was so profound.

So, Julia, your little pause and tears. I would say, well, it was nothing compared with the impact it had on Isaiah as he saw the Lord high and lifted up.

And it was that vision of who God is that kept him and propelled him and enabled him to live and serve. And the seraphs, these burning, fiery angel creatures, say, holy, holy, holy, three times meaning it's definitely true.

Twice means it's true. Three times it's definitely true. One of the things that we've seen is the Lord Almighty and the whole earth is full of his glory. We don't see that, do we?

It's so easy for our view of God to be squashed down to, Lord, help me to remember the shopping this week or something like that. But God is so much bigger than that.

[32 : 51] The whole earth is full of his glory. And the God of the prophet Isaiah, the God of the book of Isaiah, is in a league of his own.

We get it in the reading that we had, Isaiah 40, 25, where he says, To whom will you compare me, or who is my equal, says the Holy One?

Well, that's a very good question, isn't it? To whom will you compare me? Who in our mental vision of things compares with God?

Who looms largest? Well, what looms largest? The fact I've got an MOT on the car coming up this week, or I've got a doctor's appointment this week, or I've got a bill to pay by the end of the month, or I've got this list of things to do for work.

Those are the big things, are they? But God says, I'm bigger than that. I'm not worth comparing with those things. To whom will you compare me? I am in a league of my own, says God.

[34 : 00] I am in a league of my own. There's no one to whom you can say, Oh, our God's a bit like this. And the message of Isaiah 40 is not that God is too big to care.

It does say things that might let you think that. It says, surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket. They are regarded as the dust on the scales. So in some ways, God looks at what we think is big and says, That's just a little bit of, hang on, let's get the duster out.

Yeah, nothing, nothing. You know, get the scales ready. You're going to make a cake or something, and you might just, they're a little bit dusty. And then you start weighing stuff out.

And for God, the nations are just like that little bit of dust. So in some ways, you might think that God is so big, he doesn't really notice us.

But that's not the correct message. He is too big to fail. And in Isaiah 40, we have in verse 26, God says, look at the stars.

[35 : 12] There's loads of stars. I don't, God says, I don't get baffled by the number of stars. I know each of them by name.

In verse 27, he 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.

He says, you shouldn't draw that conclusion. If God knows the stars, he knows perfectly well that you've got an MOT this week, or a doctor's appointment, or you've got this list of things to get done by so-and-so, or whatever it is.

He knows that. He knows that. And he gives his strength to his people.

Verse 28, Do you not know, have you not heard, the Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary. His understanding no one can fathom.

[36 : 16] He gives strength to the weary. He increases the power of the weak. He gives to us his strength, his resources, so that we can live here on earth.

The young men will grow tired and weary. The young men will stumble and fall. It's true, isn't it?

Even the young fit people, I don't look, I look at the...

Even the young fit people will get to the point where they say, Oh, I'm just completely exhausted.

Even Usain Bolt gets a pulled hamstring.

What about that? But those who wait on the Lord, it says, those who put their, 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. This great God is not too big to care. He is too big to fail.

[37 : 18] A big history.

A big project. Big saviors. Actually, a big saviour. A big God. Somewhere around 701 BC, it was King Hezekiah, who was the king of the puny kingdom, Judah, in a threatened city, Jerusalem, overshadowed by hostile powers, which was Assyria, with the enemy at the gates.

And he prays to the big God with a big history, planning a big project, and references a big saviour.

And God says, I will defend this city and save it for my sake and for the sake of David, my servant.

He was the God who saved Hezekiah and his city on that occasion. And he's still as big a God today for us.

I'll ask, is He your God? Why don't you ask Him to be your God? Why don't you ask Him to take you into His big project?

[38 : 53] Why don't you ask Him to introduce you to the big saviour, Jesus, through whom He does all these things? Behold your God, seated on His throne.

Come, let us adore Him. Let's see.