

The city of God and its future

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Preacher: Philip Wells

[0:00] And may the Lord help us as we come to look at his word together. So if you can have a Bible or can look across at a Bible, we're going to be looking at the bits that were read.

It's in Isaiah 3 and 4. And Ben, I don't know whether there's a gentleman outside wondering whether to come in or whether he's wanting something.

So I'm going to ask you a question. What would you write when life as we know it had completely collapsed?

When the world order is shaken in a way that makes the stock market collapse look like a tiny wobble? When the Christian consensus seems to be on the losing side?

When Christians are suffering? What would you write? What would you draw people's attention to? And in case you think I'm talking about now, I'm actually talking about the sack of Rome in 410 by the Visigoths.

[1:19] If you are an international student who is a Visigoth this morning, nothing personal is intended by this reference. In 410, the city of Rome was destroyed.

And the whole of civilization seemed to have collapsed. And somebody did write something. It was Augustine, a very famous Christian teacher.

He was the pastor of a CD seaside town. Just mention that. He wrote a Christian classic book called The City of God.

Or The City of God Against the Pagans it was called. And in this situation of instability, anxiety, confusion, he said, this is what we need to look at.

The city of God that doesn't get shaken, that doesn't get destroyed. He wrote it. It's a very long book. I've got a paperback version about that thick. To explain to his people why this present life was always going to be flawed.

[2:33] So he tried to not get them to have too much hope in this present world. He wrote it to motivate his people to keep on going. He says there is something worth living for and dying for.

And if you like, he wrote The City of God to put fire in their hearts and iron in their blood. That's the vision Pastor Augustine put before his people in that situation.

And that's the vision that we're going to look at this morning. Because it's totally an Isaiah thing.

Where did Augustine get the idea of the City of God from?

Well, one of the places he got it was from the book of Isaiah. So that's what we're going to look at this morning. The City of God. And my plan is that we will follow the sequence of the words in the chapters.

We'll look first of all at judgment on the city. There's judgment on the leaders and the people. And then there's a second section of judgment on the city. And then chapter 4 is mostly stark change about the beauty of the city.

[3:48] And I'll try and say a little bit about how you get from one to the other. Let me just take you back. When was this book written? It was written back in the time of the kings.

It was written about Judah and Jerusalem. That's to say the southern kingdom back in those days. Kings Isaiah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. Lots of things happened in that period of time.

But just to remind us that the Jerusalem of which he was speaking, otherwise known as Zion, there's the city. We're to understand it as being the city which is the capital of the nation.

And this nation in the time of the Old Testament had the particular privilege of being the one nation that God sort of took under his wing and adopted into his family and taught and looked after them. So it was a city that had been chosen by grace, a nation that God had redeemed from slavery in Egypt. They'd been given God's word, God's laws, and it was the city where the great king had his headquarters.

[5:05] So all of those things attached to this city. As the history went on, there were different periods of time, different challenges.

I think this sounds like it's written in a time of ease and prosperity, like the early part of this period. But it's always clear, it's always clear that the city that God is actually looking at is a future city. He's looking, as it were, through the current city to what it's meant to be in the future. And that's very clear as we go through these chapters this morning.

So let me remind you of what we were looking at last time. There's a very stark clash, contrast between the fierce things that God says and the beautiful things that God says.

And there's a fierce accusation and declaration of future judgment on that city as God saw it. As he looked at it in that period of time, he said, this is not what it's supposed to be.

[6:15] And you find that, well we found that in chapter 2, verses 6 to 22, which we saw last time. Where Israel had started to learn the ways of the nations.

Do you remember? She became like the nations and worshipped idols. And the city was a city with blood on its hands. And that continues to be the sort of theme through until we get to chapter 6.

And then we have these extravagant, almost unreasonable, almost unbelievable promises about the future city. Which is what we had in the first part of chapter 2 last time.

The mountain of the Lord will be established as chief among the mountains. And all the nations will flow to it. So the very opposite of what was happening. The nations will come to Israel to learn about God.

Rather than the other way around. And that happens all the way through. There they are. Or the mountain rises up and people flow to find out about God.

[7:18] So that's what we've been looking at in the same sort of pattern today. So let's look at what it says. Chapter 3. See now the Lord, the Lord Almighty, is about to take from Jerusalem and Judah both supply and support.

All supplies of food, all supplies of water. Isaiah loves lists.

There's a list. There's a list of those. He says, I'm going to take all those away. And then he says, what you'll get instead are childish leaders.

Verse 4. I will make boys their officials. Mere children will govern them. People will oppress each other. Man against man. Neighbour against neighbour. The young will rise up against the old. The base against the honourable. And so on. So he says that this is what he will do to this city which is failing to follow him and failing to be what she should be.

[8:25] I will take away the worthy leaders and you will have childish incompetent leaders. And the effect of this is for chaos in society.

So it's interesting that having leaders in itself is not a wrong thing. In fact, it's a good thing. Having the wrong leaders is the problem. And we'll get to the point in chapter 3 verse 6 where he says, A man will seize one of his brothers at his father's home and say, You have a cloak.

You be our leader. You take charge of this heap of ruins. But in that day he'll cry out, I have no remedy. I have no food or clothing in my house. Don't make me the leader of the people.

So no one will want to be leader. So he's all discussing the leadership there. And he makes this charge in verse 8. Jerusalem staggers. Judah is falling.

Their words and deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence. The look on their faces testifies against them. They parade their sin like Sodom.

[9:31] And he says that God has his presence, his face as it were, looking at Jerusalem.

And they defy him. They turn against him. They, it says, their words and deeds are against the Lord, defying his glorious presence.

And I think perhaps one of the ways they would have done that would be to turn to idols. So I've revived my picture of an idol being worshipped there. And he goes on to say, The look on their

faces testifies against them.

They parade their sin like Sodom. And they do not hide it. There's sort of shamelessness about this. Woe to them. They have brought disaster on themselves.

And there's something that is self-chosen about this. Something in which really they brought it on themselves. Which is a sad, sad thing, isn't it?

[10:34] God's judgment has that aspect of its working. If we choose not to have God in our lives, God says, Okay, see what life is like without me.

And we've chosen, well, an empty, a way of life that, that is eventually destructive and self-destructive.

That's what's going on here. If we skip over to verse 12, we find something about incompetent leaders.

Youths oppress my people. Women rule over them. I think it's talking about the oppression here.

Oh, my people, your guides lead you astray. They turn you from the path.

And God says, this is what's happening. I judge you. Verse 13 and 14. The Lord takes his place in court. He rises to judge the people.

[11:40] The Lord enters into judgment. Notice he is actually judging the people and their leaders. He rises to judge the people.

Verse 13. He enters into judgment with the elders and leaders of his people. But he has harsh words for the leaders. He says, it is you who have ruined my vineyard.

The plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor, declares the Lord, the Lord Almighty.

And you get a picture of the sort of society that he's addressing. The vineyard, thinking of the city in agricultural terms, is ruined.

The poor are plundered. People are crushed. And this very striking metaphor, you grind the faces of the poor.

[12:39] I've got somewhere some people and a foot to stamp on them. Isn't that what it says in 1984? The picture of a boot stamping on a foot.

A boot standing on a face forever. A horrible picture of a society which is destroying itself.

A society where which has become inhuman. A society power and money are valued over people.

A social structure of corruption and oppression where everyone actually who can exploits the weak for financial gain. Just thinking of the recent change in leadership in South Africa.

Hasn't it been? With the outgoing president accused of corruption right at the top peeling off money and everybody else within that structure getting as much as they can so it's the people right at the bottom who get their faces ground and the whole society is affected by this.

[14:01] Without trying to analyse any particular country we know what this means don't we? we get a feel for this and God says I'm just so against that that is so inhuman because the God of the Bible doesn't make us less human he makes us more human and this turning away from God has produced within Israel who should know so much better this inhumanity this exploitation this abuse of power so just stopping to take breath on this we learn that good leaders are a gift from God the society that God has in mind is not leader less it has leaders and we could also suggest that it seems to be saying that people get the leaders they deserve when the nation turns away from the Lord this is the sort of leadership that he allows them to have or gives them we learn that removal of leaders is a judgment

I will take your leaders away and the presence of incompetent leaders is a judgment and the Lord hates power hungry self serving leaders who are in it not for the service that they can render but for what they can get out of it and that's a horrible thing in any society of course the church is not immune from this and New Testament warns the New Testament communities of having leaders who lord it over the flock is one of the things Peter says there should not be an abuse of power and he also warns the apostle Paul warns the Ephesian elders not to be motivated by the money they can get out of Christian work it's a little bit of a caricature of the

American TV evangelist who says put your hand on the TV screen you'll get cured as long as you send \$100 to my ministry and it's always been the case that there's always this potential for God's work God's kingdom to be spoiled by abuse of power and just doing it for money so let's go back and before we move on just take another breath and look at the verse that I skipped over which is verse 10 tell the righteous it will be well with them for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds woe to the wicked disaster is upon them they will be paid back for what their hands have done a little address to the people in the middle of this call to them tell the righteous it will be well with them for they will eat the fruit of their deeds if you had been there in that city all those years ago you would probably have needed to hear something like that wouldn't you wouldn't you have been thinking it's all going wrong most people have turned away from the

Lord the leaders are leading us in the wrong direction what's the point of anything really and here's this little gem of encouragement for them which says to the righteous people the people whose hearts are in the right place tell the righteous it will be well with them for they will eat in joy they will eat the fruit of their deeds here's a puzzled Israelite and this word comes to them even in that society there not everybody was corrupt and false God had a few people this word remnant will be cropping up he keeps a few people for himself they're right with God and there's a promise that even in this swirling torrent of judgment and corruption that

God has them in mind tell the righteous it will be well with them actually the word is good the translation that most of us have says tell the righteous it will be well with them but in the original it says it will be good for them and that's a very rich word isn't it tell the righteous there's good for them so we all want isn't it something in life that isn't bitter disappointing pointless but something that's good and he says tell the righteous it's good with them and he says they will eat the fruit of their deeds another rather lovely picture a to eat the fruit of their deeds Bible talks a lot about the consequences of actions and here are good actions maybe nobody has noticed them a very famous good action that

[19:50] Jesus noticed of a woman who put a tiny little coin into the collection in the temple nobody else thought anything of it but Jesus noticed it and said that is really she's done a wonderful thing and here is God noticing the good the fruit of what people have done and it's just a little snippet there that says it's worth pressing on in the New Testament Paul writes to the Corinthians and he has a big thing about the future resurrection and then he says and the point of that is this your labour!

in the Lord is not in vain that's a word of encouragement isn't it? Your labour in the Lord is not in vain they will eat the fruit of their deeds so I just stop to point out that the sort of right living right person that he's addressing here somebody right with God does stuff they will eat the fruit of their deeds your labour in the Lord is not in vain let me introduce you to this species!

under threat the Christian worker so you're thinking a Christian worker that's somebody who's paid by the churches to do stuff and in the old days a Christian worker was a Christian that's what a Christian was they would do stuff for the Lord they might not be able to do a lot but they would make it their business to do something I remember Dick Lucas talking about his Anglican clergyman reflecting back on the time when a number of churches closed a particular branch of Christian churches closed and he said well they closed but what we got was people from them who were great Christian workers so they left their churches closed but they found places in other churches to work I just point that out it says they will eat the fruit of their deeds they did stuff anyway let's move on and

I'm just going to take one more breath before we go into the next little bit reflection on leadership as we come over all these hundreds of years into the new covenant into what Jesus brings and of course the great leader we find many names for his leadership he's called a shepherd so that's a leader because shepherds in those cultures would lead their sheep it was the butcher who drove the sheep the shepherds would lead the sheep he's called an overseer because he looks out and looks on his people he's called the saviour of his people he's called the friend of his people and of course he's called the lord of his people there's the shepherd there's the sheep and in the new testament we are encouraged strongly to take on his approach to leadership and there's a passage in

Philippians that some of you will be very familiar with where he talks about the mentality of this leader who being in very nature God did not count equality with God something to be hung on to but humbled himself and made himself into a servant and even became human and even died and he says that's the mentality that leaders ought to have let this mindset be in you he says and he says it actually not just to the leaders but the whole church that's the sort of society that Jesus comes to bring Jesus didn't hang on to glory but was willing to give it up sacrificially for the benefit of his people and of course the writer of that letter was postponing glory because he said it would be great for me to go to glory now he says that at the beginning of the letter but it better actually to postpone that because I can help you by staying here longer in this life and Ben was reminding us of another reference to leadership the reference to

[24:32] Timothy the rare example says Paul he doesn't tell us how rare who takes a genuine interest in your welfare not just his own interests that's how it's to be in the New Testament looking out for the interests of others and it's not just addressed to the leaders but it's certainly expected of them it's actually addressed to everybody so I could address that to you I've sort of wandered quite a long way from ancient Israel but we've got to this point we're meant not to be exploiting and trying to have power over one another we're meant to look out for our best interests for one another's best interests it's a bit of a challenge for us these days because we've got so many people in the meeting if you just look around with the corner of your eye and you might think

I don't know many of these people it is a challenge for us to get to know and to be a Christian church anyway I drew breath several times there let's go on to the next section which is this bit about the women in verse 18 the women of Zion are haughty walking along with outstretched necks flirting with their eyes tripping along with mincing steps with ornaments jingling on their ankles so this is speaking of my translation says the women of Zion anybody got anything different there women of Zion more literally daughters of Zion or perhaps daughter of Zion and that ought to alert us it isn't simply referring to the female inhabitants because daughter of Zion can refer to the city itself it said that in chapter one the daughter of

Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard it's almost a way of expressing the whole population so it can mean woman daughter of Zion woman but it certainly leans over into saying the inhabitants of Zion or the population as a whole so bear that in mind as he makes another rather stinging attack on a judgment on this or society looked at this way or this section of society so he loves lists as we've seen so he has now a list of attractive ways of walking walking along with outstretched necks I'm not going to try and demonstrate it to you flirting with their eyes tripping along with mincing steps with ornaments jingling around their ankles and he says this is what the city looks like what they're trying to do this is another sort of power thing of trying to attract a man in this case trying to attract a mate isn't it and he says rather stingingly the

Lord will bring sores on the head of the women of Zion the Lord will make their scalps bald then we have another list in that day the Lord will snatch away their finery bangles headbands crescent necklaces earrings bracelets veils headdresses ankle chains sashes perfume bottles charms signet rings nose rings fine robes capes cloaks purses mirrors linen garments tiaras and shawls it's almost like a department store isn't it first floor for tiaras and shawls second stores etc and I think I've missed out a click just bear with me the catwalk is going to be turned into this horrible I don't know outpatients department soars on the heads of the women of Zion and then this list of accessories is that the correct generic term for these things that with which one accessorizes perfume bottles charms all of this will become exchanged for well really he's thinking about what's going on in Syria at the moment when your city gets or your supermarket and shopping mall gets bombed and your water supply gets cut off and soldiers come and take you away and he says instead of fragrance there'll be a stench instead of a sash a rope instead of well dressed hair baldness instead of fine clothing sackcloth instead of beauty branding your men will fall by the sword your warriors in battle the gates of Zion will lament and mourn destitute she will clothes all gone finery all gone dignity all gone just family support all gone sitting on the ground weeping she sits on the ground destitute and in chapter 4 verse 1 he says in that day seven women will take hold of one man and say we will eat our own food we'll provide our own clothes but just let us be called by your name and take away our disgrace because we're alone vulnerable we're nobodies now this is what

happens in war isn't it all the men go off to war get killed and you get this disproportionate number of women who are left on there it happened in the first world war didn't it happened in the second world war and the attraction of a supporter a mate a partner turns into a scramble to grab anything that remotely looks like a breadwinner or a protector and we've entered now a state of shame the city turns out to be a destitute city a shamed city a widow city the catwalk becomes the bread line so let's just reflect on this a little bit it's put in terms of the female it's put in terms of the women [31:25] I think our society is sort of trying to obliterate sexual differences not quite sure how to our society is very confused about this I think the bible is keen to say men and women are different there's something there are strengths and weaknesses about men there are strengths and weaknesses about women and there are particular glorious things about women the woman is it says in the new testament is the glory of the man whatever that is that's what it says and here is the glory aspect of of the city that which should be beautiful and attractive that which should be nurturing and sort of mothering and that is the bit that gets hit that's the bit that is ruined that's the aspect that he's talking about here and I take this opportunity to go off in the opposite direction and say there's this poor sad ruined city the daughter of Zion but as we shall see in a moment but I'm jumping ahead a little bit here

God says I will have a beautiful city and the very end of the bible says I saw the holy city prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband now is the dwelling of God with men the bible uses that female feminine angle to say that's what God will have he will have a glorious city there I've drawn a glorious bride that's one of the things about the church it says in in the new testament Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to take away the spots and blemishes and wrinkles the loneliness the ruinedness the shame and to make her holy and to present her to himself as a radiant church

I'm getting ahead of myself but that's a beautiful thing isn't it it's a beautiful way of putting it that God will take what was ugly destitute abandoned ruined and make beautiful glorious and uses the idea of the bride to do that let's go on into the next section which really does give us the positives so this is now chapter 4 verse 2 in that day so now we've got a long collage of descriptions about what it will be in that day the branch of the Lord will be beautiful and glorious 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 the Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion he will cleanse the blood stains from

Jerusalem by a spirit of judgment and a spirit of fire then the Lord will create over all Mount Zion and those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day a glow of flaming fire by night over all the glory will be a canopy it will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day and a refuge and hiding place from the storm and rain so let's think a little bit about that he starts off with this vegetable description so branch fruit and Bible scholars say what is he referring to because later on the branch refers to the king is that what he means here well I'm not quite sure is this one person he's referring to or is he using branch to mean the sort of revived perking up new city well he says the branch so let's draw a branch and he says it's got fruit so let's put some fruit on it and these are the people that come through this the surviving people and he uses some words beautiful glorious the pride and glory of the survivors in

Israel and by way of real contrast with the sharpness of judgment think of those words adornment glory pride beauty these are the words he speaks of what will be true about the city and it's the Lord the branch of the Lord and then there's another thing about the Lord the Lord verse!

[36:38] excuse me will wash away the filth of the women of Zion he will cleanse the blood stains from Jerusalem so there's a washing which takes place a powerful washing in one of the Psalms David says to the Lord wash me and I will be clean make me whiter than snow there's lots of things in our world which contaminate and lots of analyses which show how things are going wrong but there's precious little in this world which shows us how we can be clean but it says the Lord will wash away the Lord can make clean and then it says the Lord will create over Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke it's picture language so let's

not try and analyse it too deeply because we don't try and do it reasonably quickly but it's something the

Lord creates the Lord makes a new wonderful beautiful thing and he's there in on it the smoke by day and glow of flaming fire by night suggest the symbolism of his presence and I want us to think about the canopy end of verse five you think a canopy why do they need a canopy what is a canopy well I looked it up in the books of people who know about these things and they say this is what in those days would be used for a honeymoon suite it would be the canopy the give me another word for a canopy covering yeah like a canvas covering or something like a tent and it would be particularly used over the place where the bride and the bridegroom would be when they were married and assuming that's correct it makes this a rather beautiful continuous picture doesn't it of the destitute

Jerusalem now becoming the bride the beautiful bride God does a new thing and there's other connections there as well it'll be a shelter and a shade from the heat of the day and a refuge and a hiding place from the storm and the wind so there's shelter and safety in this place the more you think about it the more wonderful this picture is adornment beauty cleaning the the bridal suite as it were God's bridal suite for his people and the shelter and the security he says that you won't any longer be troubled by from the heat of the day or the storm and the rain every human heart longs for that doesn't it we live in a world of trouble we live in a world of insecurity and God says here in this place there is security and shelter and safety and he's talking about the assembly of God the place where he gets his people together very important we realise that it's a corporate picture it's a group picture it's getting people together it's a future picture it'll be fulfilled in the future that's what that's the future hope of

Christianity and very important that we realise there's a future aspect of Christian faith but in this present world the nearest thing we have to it is the churches that's the groups of Christian people a group in the Lord a group belonging to the Lord a group where the Lord is it's a very precious thing we look at it through the spectacles of this text for Christian people to be together to to some extent share their lives together care for one another these things are in not full measure but in genuine reality true of the church now there's a degree of beauty there's a degree of security and I think this is such an attractive picture don't you wouldn't you say on the basis of this bit of the Bible what a privilege to belong to this group what a privilege to be part of

God's city if I can put it that way we'll sing in a moment saviour if of Zion's city I through grace and ember am let the world deride or pity I will glory in your name it's a wonderful thing to belong to the city of God even now in her incomplete and vexed and unsatisfactory state because that's what the church is at the moment but this is where God's at work and how like Nehemiah we should be concerned for the city of God if its gates are burned with fire that should upset us and make us pray what a thing to look forward to this is what God has said to our human race is the one thing that we can confidently look forward to this is the one thing that we should align our lives so that we don't miss this so that whatever direction we're going in it should be at its end point that we arrive at the city of

[42:39] God there's nowhere else to go this is where we want to be headed when John Bunyan wrote Pilgrim's Progress he had it right that's what the world needs to know so let me just wind up because I said I'd try and say a little bit about how you get from the judgment to the city and I don't think he actually tells us but I think he tells us a few things so you have to come back next week to find out a bit more I don't think he tells us but it's pretty clear that he's not saying turn over a new leaf try harder do your best and then you'll get there it's not hinging on the merit of adequate performance he's not saying try harder because he says unless the Lord had left us some survivors we would have been!

Sodom we would have been like Gomorrah the people who are survivors they make it through the judgment and this is an act of God's kindness which is a rather inexplicable one and it flags up this whole matter of God choosing to safeguard some people just because he chooses to do so the technical Christian word is grace and the word that's used in Isi for this people is a remnant people who deserve to be swept away but he sort of says no we'll keep those on one side by kindness a remnant by grace if you're thinking about what it is to be a Christian just bear that in mind Christianity isn't try hard to do your best it's I need God to do something for me that I don't deserve

second thing it is hinging on the strong promises of God for future action so this whole section that we're looking at it's got these promises sort of planted into it this is what I'm going to do this is what I'm going to do this is what I'm going to do and I rather loved the wills in that day the branch of the Lord will be beautiful the Lord will wash away the filth God saying I will do this that was something that for them was the future some of the things that God has done are in the past where God says I have done this and there's one place in history where somebody says of what will be done and they say I've done it and one place is where Jesus died on the cross and he sort of thought provokingly to say the least on the cross when he had suffered said finished so he done something and I think this all links up this puts us in the realm of trusting in promises and that's a very important part of

Christian the Christian way of relating to God to trust his future promises and another thing that there is here there's quite a lot about fire the melting away by fire washing away by fire fire is a powerful force and we'll find out a bit more about that as the chapters go on but somewhere there is a fire storm of judgment which can't be avoided I'll just leave it at that and let me say one other thing here that as the prophecy goes on there are little places where God engages with people and says will you be willing!

this? Will you come with me on this? the Lord in a personal way asks for willingness do you remember in the first chapter he says come let us reason together though your sins are like scarlet they shall be white as snow they are red as crimson they shall be like wool if you're willing and obedient so God is looking for some softness of heart some openness or what he's not looking for is a stubbornness!

[47:23] say I'm not going to do that I'm not going to take any notice of God he's looking for the opposite he's engaging saying will you say yes to me on these things will you go with me on these things will you open yourself up to me with these things if you're just on the very edge will you tiptoe a little bit further forward because he's saying this is an interpersonal thing I want you to be willing their words and deeds are against the Lord if you are willing and obedient you will eat of the good of the land so I could ask end up with two questions I could put it this way I could say will you have this city to be your city would you say that's where I want to belong this is the city I want to be part of or if we put it into the marriage language I could say will you take this

God of Israel the Lord to be your God as it were will you take him to be your lawful wedded husband to have and to hold from this day forward till death us do part except it won't let's sing something together