

Endings Matter

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- [0 : 00] Let me invite you to take up God's Word again, to take up your Bibles, and turn back to page 752 in the Church Bibles with me as we come to read and hear God's Word.
- And as you're turning there, let me pray for us. Father, we turn now to the Bible, to your authoritative Word, which speaks of a Savior, which speaks of your plans and your purposes.
- And as your people, we pause now, expecting on your Spirit to speak. For without the work of your Spirit, we will not be able to understand what this says.
- Take the words of a mere man and use them for your glory. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.
- I don't know if you are anything like me, but you might be reading a book or watching a film or a series on Netflix or insert subscription service of your choice.
- [1 : 15] Or you may be playing a video game, probably not for those who are past 50. I mean, you might be playing video games past 50. I don't know you, and I don't know your entertainment habits. But you get all the way through it, you get all the way to the very end of said piece of entertainment, literature, film, series, game, whatever it is.
- And you get to the end, and really it's a bit rotten. You've been there, haven't you? You've got to the end of it, and it's all a dream. And you're like, oh, okay. I've invested two hours in this, and it's a bit of a nothing of an ending.
- It doesn't really have much of a punch to it. And what you can see straight away is that the publisher wants to get whatever it is onto the shelves. Or the production team who are behind the scenes getting this done have got a deadline that they've got to meet.
- They've run out of budget. Or maybe the writers have just run out of imagination. They've got no creativity left, no fuel in the tank to get the rest of the story to its beautiful climactic end that we were expecting.
- It's frustrating, isn't it? It's frustrating because you invest time. But that frustration is actually very helpful. Because it helps to point out to us something that's really important for humanity.
- [2 : 29] Something that is really important for all people, no matter their culture, their worldview, or their background. Endings. Endings really matter, don't they? Endings are built into us.
- We want to know how something ends. We want it to be kind of happily ever after. We want to know that evil will be dealt with. We want to know that something's going to come to this beautiful climactic end.
- We want to know how things are all going to work out. And that's what we see in the last few chapters of this amazing prophecy of Isaiah. Far from this being a disappointing ending to this prophecy, the climax of Isaiah's words to God's people in Jerusalem are compelling.
- They are complete. They are complete. And they are a beautiful vision of the future for the people of God. Maybe you were at a fireworks display a few weeks back.

And you get to the end of it and everybody, let's be fair to it, is expecting the big explosion. You don't want it to finish with a pop. You want it to finish with a bang. Isaiah explodes with light against the darkness.

[3 : 44] It just lights up our imaginations and it lights up the sky or the storyline of scripture. There is joy-filled excitement and anticipation about what God is going to do for his people.

And here is part of the vision which helps to keep our hearts and our minds focused on what it means for us to be the people of God. What it means for us to be involved in God's mission.

To be involved in God's mission means that we have to remember what this all looks like in the light of eternity. And that's what we want to have as our sort of bigger theme for this evening.

And under that there's three little hooks that we can put our hat on for each of them. And the first one is this. Why God judges? Verses 1 to 16 of chapter 65.

Let's look at that first of all. Why God judges? Before we succumb to the normal temptation that pretty much all of us have to skip to the very end of the story. To find out the punchline.

[4 : 46] To understand how it all ends. We need to deal with the difficult details before we do that. God has been very clear through his word that there are two trajectories for the entirety of humanity.

There is repentance and faith. And it leads to life. But there is also rebellion and disobedience. Which very clearly leads to death. And separation from God.

And that is what God is spelling out for his people in this section. This is why God judges. Because he has said that he is going to. But what we see is some of the detail about why he brings about that judgment.

We see a beautiful picture, don't we? Right at the very beginning of chapter 65. Of a great king, the great king, pleading with his people to come back to them.

Here am I. All day long I have held out my hands, verse 2. To an obstinate people. God is beckoning people, pleading with them to come to him.

[5 : 54] Particularly pleading with his own people. The obstinate people of God. But their hearts are defiant. And they are happy to incite him face to face.

They are like little children. Prodding and poking and just having a bit of a laugh. And nothing like my children, obviously. Who would never do that to their daddy. Ever. They incite them face to face.

They offer sacrifices wherever they want to whoever they want. And you see that in verse 3 of chapter 65. They consult the dead.

And they lurk in the darkness. And unite themselves with things which are unclean. Things that they have been told by God to separate themselves from. Because it's not fitting for the people of God to be united to these things.

Although these things aren't positive. They're actually not the full reason why the Lord judges his people. These are the sort of presenting issues about the real problem.

[7 : 01] The heart of the problem is a matter of the heart. Always is. If you want great clarification to that, look. Mark chapter 7. It's not what comes into a person, says Jesus.

It is what flows out from the heart. Which makes someone unclean. Did you see that? That's what it seems to be saying, isn't it? In verses 5 through 7 of chapter 56.

It is to do with the matter of the heart. What provokes God to judge is his people. And I suppose wider humanity. With an arrogant heart. In private, they trust their own righteousness.

Their own do-gooding. Practicing deceit and immorality. But in public, oh man, they can put on a good show. Wow.

If they were to get an Oscar, they would deserve it. They can tell others, we do the God stuff. We get the God stuff. We know the God stuff.

[8 : 03] I can argue you under the table about the God stuff. But in their heart, quite a different story.

You see, this attitude of heart is like the strong smoky smell of an oven. Which hasn't been cleaned for a long time. And you've turned it on. And all of the gunk that's inside it starts burning.

And see, when you open up the oven door, it just comes out. And the smoke goes up your nostrils. And it starts to make your eyes water. And obviously, we don't clean our oven in our house. That seems to be what he's saying, isn't it?

It's like smoke that goes up my nostrils. The smell and the taste and everything just lingers there. It is disgusting. It burns the nostrils.

Makes the eyes water. And it is this heart attitude that can so quickly characterize the people of God. We know that temptation, don't we?

[9 : 05] To make it all look good on the outside. Or to polish it up like there's no tomorrow. And make sure that everybody realizes that everything's going okay for Martin. Thank you very kindly. But inwardly, we're not actually really that bothered.

We're wandering. We're wandering further and further away. And actually, the most challenging thing is that we're getting quite okay with our wandering.

We're getting quite okay with the fact that we're not really living as disciples of Jesus. Not really participating in what it means to be part of the people of God.

If that's you this evening, please hear this warning from God to his people. A lifestyle of complacency, which is complicit and compromised with the current societal norms, is a dangerous path.

It is dicing with death. And it is not something to toy around with. With his people so blatantly compromising with the prevailing worldview of the time, God had to act in judgment.

[10 : 23] It was decades from this point. But the hammer eventually fell. The blow eventually struck. Because God had to act in the face of such flagrant disobedience.

After all, it is his people. And this city, which was supposed to be the light to the nations, this was supposed to be exhibit A in God's kingdom-building project throughout the whole world.

And yet, what is it that they saw? Nothing different. Everything pretty much the same. Only with a kind of other God thing. Similar to what everybody else was doing.

What sort of light would the peoples who were surrounding them be attracted to when the people of God were complicit with the prevailing worldview?

There would be no call to repentance. There would be no invitation to know this God. There would be no invitation to come before this God and this God alone. If the messengers are not living and speaking distinctive things, then how would others know about the goodness of this God?

[11 : 35] If his people are quite happy to do everything else around about them the same way as everyone else, then how are people going to hear? Why are they ever going to ask questions?

Why does God judge? Because ultimately God has a great concern for his name. God has a great concern for his name.

And this is one of the big things that sometimes in the people of God we forget. The reason that God does anything is for his glory. The reason God acts in salvation is not primarily for us, but for his glory.

The reason that he acts in judgment is not primarily to deal with other people, but it's to display his glory, his perfection, his holiness, his purity. Why does he judge? Because he must be displayed and known as glorious.

He has a concern for his name. Don't believe me? Take a tour through the book of Ezekiel. Chapter 36 particularly. And that is exactly what God nails down for his people.

[12 : 44] All of these things have happened to you, just as Isaiah had predicted. For this reason, that the nations would know my glory. He has a concern for his glory, but he also has a concern that all people would know who he is.

How is it possible for the nations and the peoples around about them, or the nations and the people around about us, today as God's people, to know him when we are complicit with the prevailing worldview?

So why does God judge? That's the first thing that we've been thinking about. What God promises. Why God judges what God promises is our next little hook for this evening.

This ending isn't the only trajectory though. There's like a fork in the road that opens up. There is a second trajectory, and what is so beautiful to see is that not all of God's people were compromised.

There will be some left, like a few grapes on a big vine. Most of the vine is a bit rotten, but my goodness, there's some juicy bunches of grapes hanging on for dear life.

[13 : 55] You see that verse 8, that's the picture that we're being given in chapter 65. God will be kind to those who are faithful to him. What God promises his people is amazing, and it is filled with hope.

It is good news for his people then. It is good news for us this evening. And it is good news for the whole world. God has not abandoned his plan and his purpose to keep his people, to use them to display the gospel of his glory.

Now unlike those who trust in themselves, those who truly know God, the people who really are God's people, recognize that what God delights in is not all of the knowledge in the world and all of the capacity and ability in the world.

God actually doesn't really care about that. Why would that impress God when he knows us, made us, gives us breath to disown him? No, what God loves to see, and what God actually alone can give to people, is a contrite heart and a humble spirit.

That's what we see in verses 1 to 2 of chapter 66, isn't it? That's what we see. These are the ones I look on with favor. Those who are humble and contrite in spirit and who tremble at my word.

[15 : 16] These people have a very different understanding of who God is and why we worship, why we do anything that we do. It is not some sort of external ritualistic performance.

It is the outworking of a deeply rooted internal relationship, which is not all nice and rosy from now until forevermore.

It is one which is worked out in the depths of difficulty and in the high points of joy. These are people who understand who God is. They know his character.

They know what he desires. And they seek to live in accordance with this. These are the people that God delights to be gracious and kind towards, revealing to them the beautiful end to which all things are headed, revealing to them what his mission looks like in the light of eternity.

I just want to draw out two big things that we see in this section under what God promises. What does he promise? He promises a whole new world. Isn't it a spectacular description of God's purposes for his people?

[16:27] There is a new heavens and a new earth where the former corruption and collusion with the worldview is no more. Verse 17, chapter 65. Where the city will never hear the sound of painful weeping because of children dying or actually anyone dying.

People will be able to build houses and live lives in the knowledge that they are secure and will not fall into economic destitution. They will take joy in their labor.

They will not have people come along and say, excuse me, I'm just going to buy all that off of you because I've got a whole lot more cash and you will just shut up and do what I say. Which sadly, for many of our brothers and sisters, is their reality in the everyday.

They are followers of Jesus. People who are not followers of Jesus come alongside them, have a whole lot more money than them, adopt the prevailing worldview and say, thank you very much. We're just going to take all of the things that you've worked for.

And then we in Scotland say that we've got hard lives. It's quite a beautiful vision, isn't it? It's quite a wonderful vision. And to quote one of my favorite TV programs of all time and one of my favorite characters of all time, it's Life Gym, but not as we know it.

[17:50] Isn't it amazing? Isn't it a glorious vision? Maybe you don't like Star Trek. Maybe Disney and Aladdin's more your thing. It's a whole new world. A whole fantastic point of view that you never knew before.

Because what God is doing is making all things new. Isn't it so beautiful to see that what Isaiah thinks of, sees and hears from God and records some six, seven hundred years prior to the coming of Jesus, we hear being echoed and brought to its climax at the end of the Bible where God says, I will wipe away all of their tears.

There will be no more mourning, suffering, death, anything like that because the old order of things has passed away. Because behold, we'll make all things new because of my son Jesus Christ.

This is God's promise to his people who would persevere in the face of a culture which is turning away from him. And for us in contemporary Scotland, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we need to hear that in our current surroundings.

Though people mock God and the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we see the king for who he truly is. Not because we've somehow got it, but because God in his beautiful, gracious, providential mercy has opened our eyes and awoken our dead hearts to see him.

[19:20] We don't believe in pie in the sky when we die. We believe in a whole new world because the God who is faithful has promised it and I have yet to see God fail on his promises, in his word, or even in my own life.

And I'm not just saying that as some sort of triumphalist who's had a perfect life, but as someone who has gone through pain and struggle and difficulty saying God has never failed.

He has always been true to his promise. So there's a whole new world, but I want us to dig into something else. There is a place of security in terms of what God promises.

Because the former things are not present or remembered in this new way of life, in this new place that God is making for his people, it means that the experience of life itself is radically altered, radically transformed.

Isaiah uses the image of childbirth. But instead of it being something which is chaotic, verses 7 to 9 of chapter 66, instead of it being something which is chaotic and painful, it is straightforward and simple.

[20 : 29] Now, we have two children and you met them earlier on. We had to go pretty fast to get to the hospital. Twice. Because it wasn't straightforward and simple.

It was difficult. And this is where all the women are going, aye, and you don't even know the half of it, son. Again, we are reminded that God has promised and therefore it will happen.

We can be 100% certain of this. God is going to do something so wonderful, so radical, so new, that even this experience that we can understand whether we've been in this situation or not, we understand it from culture, that this is a big chaotic moment and that happens in life and God says, this is going to be totally different.

This is how radically altered life is going to be. And this highlights one of the great dimensions of life in the new creation with God. We will be eternally in His presence.

Face to face in all of His glory. And it will not be like anything else that we have ever experienced before. In this place, we will know what it really means to be people who are secure.

[21 : 44] I absolutely love the fact that the end of Isaiah and the end of Revelation so blatantly bring this point up. Do you see how Isaiah describes it?

Verse 12 and 13 of chapter 66. Let me read it for us just so that you don't think I'm making this up. Talking to His people, to the city, to those who are going to experience His goodness.

You will feed and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.

Pause there. There's not one of us present in this building this evening who is not an insecure person. I just won't buy it. You can't convince me.

You can try if you want, but that actually shows your insecurity. See what I did there? There's not one of us who's not insecure. And hearing that isn't that beautiful.

[22 : 51] Isn't that quite wonderful? Isn't that so beautiful to keep in our mind's eye? Isn't that what a world which is riddled with insecurity desperately needs to hear?

That there is a God who knows His people and who wants to so intimately take care of His people. The one who made them, desires them to be in His presence so that He can hold them like a child to be comforted.

In the Netflix series, The Crown, which just started the other week, season three, you might have watched it, there is an episode where Prince Charles, you'll be, we've been getting through the episodes quite quickly, there's an episode where Prince Charles confronts his mother.

He's been sent to Aberystwyth to study Welsh language so that he can take on the position of Prince of Wales and do it in a way which is politically sensitive. And he comes to his mother after another decision which has seen her act standoffish and also a bit passive-aggressive, acting out the British upper-middle-class attitude which keeps people and emotions at a distance.

And they have a right good rip-roaring argument in the way that very, very, very posh people do. And he gets to the very heart of this that passive-aggressive, standoffish, non-emotional contact is actually the very thing which has totally destroyed and damaged him.

[24 : 25] I guarantee that there's at least one person here and that's been their experience in life. Well, people love you. But you don't really have security in that love.

What God promises to us as his people is total security. Like being a little child who's getting bounced up and down on the knees of a mother or a father.

And yet sometimes our expression of Christianity sadly lacks this sort of emotional and relational intimacy and integrity. Instead, what we do is we become complicit with the prevailing worldview and certain traits of upper-middle-class British society as if it were the gospel, canonizing this form of emotional, unhealthy Britishness into something which should represent the culture of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When actually the opposite is the truth. I've yet to turn anywhere in the Bible where it says God's people are to be standoffish, not emotionally invested, not show integrity, not open, not honest, not displaying lavish love like the Savior who has given themselves for him.

In a society which is becoming increasingly stratified, what a message of joyful hope we have been entrusted with.

[26 : 02] Can I tell you about someone who knows me in every area and dimension of my life? Knows everything about me, warts and all, and who still loves me and cares for me.

who fully knows me and still fully loves me. My goodness, that is a compelling chat. Maybe you're a place where you want to give up in your life as a disciple.

Can I ask you, brother or sister, to take heart. Your God has promised all of these great and wonderful things and even more. And he will not let you down.

Perhaps you don't yet know this God, this gospel, this King, the Lord Jesus, and our living life as a performance. Dismissive about God, not really sure whether this stuff actually makes sense.

It is true. please hear the invitation that I and other people who know and love Jesus who are sitting next to you will bring to you. The promises of God find their yes, their security, their certainty in Jesus.

[27 : 20] There is a whole new world to come. There is a place of security which is being prepared for his people. anyone who trusts in the Lord Jesus is welcome into the presence of God now and forever.

So what are you waiting for? Turn to Jesus. Follow him. and you will have life in a way that you have never understood it before.

But we see, finally, who God invites. Who God invites. Verses 18 to 23 of the final chapter, chapter 66. I don't know about you, I get to the end of this and I'm like, man, this sounds wonderful.

Take me there now, please. Take me there now. It's like the end of a great book. You're sitting by the fire and you've just finished the last sip of your hot chocolate obviously coinciding with the last sentence of your book and you're like, isn't that fantastic?

Isn't that great? Hasn't this been wonderful? But hang on a minute. That's not the purpose of these glorious visions in God's word. That's not why they exist. We are given them as an encouragement and also as an invitation to respond.

[28 : 35] We're not to just sit back and have a jolly holiday. We are invited by the God of the universe into his mission to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth and here Isaiah in some senses is recommissioning his people with that vision that God has given to them of what it really means to be part of God's people inviting other people to join in with the family.

Yes, there will be judgment. That is absolutely certain. There is no way you can turn in the Bible and we do not see that. But from among the nations and the peoples of the world there will be people who gather together in praise to God.

Grace will be poured out for the world. That's what we see in verses 18 through 19, isn't it? People who have not seen or heard the fame or the name of God's glory are being invited.

And how do we know that this is true? Well, you're here tonight. It turns out that when Isaiah was writing in Palestine, Judah, Jerusalem, he didn't know that Scotland existed.

We are a dark, dingy little place that's usually very drich. We get a few nice, sunny weeks in a year and yet the gospel has made its way here. You are alive in Christ Jesus because you have trusted in him in faith and repentance.

[30 : 00] The gospel and the mission of God which Isaiah speaks of, we know to be true because God's word so clearly and plainly explains it to us but in our own experience because we are believers right here and right now in this part of the world, it proves to us that what he said is true.

And yet throughout the world today there are still places, still people where Christ is not named or known, where something of this vision is yet to be fulfilled, where something of the vision of the great climax of the Bible and Revelation has not yet been fully brought into being.

There are places in this world where there is no Bible, where there is no church, there is no believer who will be able to point someone to Jesus Christ. In Asia, only one in ten people will know someone who is a follower of Jesus.

Compare that to Europe and North America, the number goes to eight out of ten people will know someone who knows Jesus. God desires that all of these peoples would know him, hear of his fame and declare his glory.

God invites everyone from everywhere. Who does he invite? Everyone from everywhere. And he invites them for a specific purpose. Did you see that little verse, 21, which is so provocative for people who were part of the people of God.

[31 : 38] These nations outside of our people, I will take from them people who are Levites and priests. I will make people from them people who will be disciple makers.

I will take them and use them to draw people to grow closer to God. Doesn't it sound a lot like the final words of Jesus? People's making disciples of all peoples and he is with us to the very end of the age.

Friends, this last section of Isaiah is a beautiful invitation from God to bring in the treasure, to bring in the harvest which he cares about and it's not the money, it's not the status, it's not all the wealth of the world, it is the peoples of the world from anywhere and everywhere.

That is what God desires to see brought to him as a great offering. And at the end of this weekend where we have been thinking about the Lord's Supper and about God's mission, we have the opportunity to respond to the purposes of God in his world.

How will God use you? to see this picture and the picture from all of his word where peoples and nations from all over the shop flow and flood towards the throne room of heaven.

[33 : 03] How will God use you to see that become an increasing reality in his world? What are the gifts that God has uniquely given to you in order for this to become a reality, for this to happen?

I don't have those answers for you. You're clever people. You know God's word. It's in front of you. Pray, read, think, respond and ask him, please God, what would you have me do to see this become a reality?

can I pray and then we'll sing? Please, Father, show us what you would have us do in response to your word.

Show us who we should be, people who are generous, contrite, humble in heart, with a vision which is in line with your vision, with a heart which is captivated by your purposes and not our own, a will which wants to see your kingdom come and your kingdom established in this world and not our own.

May we become more like our Savior and your Son. May we trust in Him and may we be used by you, our Father, to see you glorified throughout this whole world.

[34 : 55] For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.