

# Isaiah - Talk 2

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[ 0 : 00 ] This morning's reading is taken from Isaiah chapter 2, and we're going to be in verses 1 to 4, and that's page 685 in the Church Bibles. The word that Isaiah, the son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it.

And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his path. For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes from many peoples. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

I want us to imagine this morning what it would be like being a Christian in Afghanistan at the moment. Imagine knowing that at any moment you could hear that knock on the door, and it could spell disaster for you and your family.

And sadly, in many instances, this is the case. The Taliban are going from door to door, and they have a list of anyone who is associated with being a Christian, or helping Christians.

[ 1 : 22 ] Sardin is why Fatima have been practicing their faith wonderfully, and you can access their prayer letter online, for the best part of 30 years in the shadows. And on the night of August 15th, 2021, when the Taliban took control of Kabul once more, Fatima welcomed a baby girl into the world.

And the significance was not lost on them. As Saad the father said, a baby girl born to a Christian family on a night like this, in a country like this, is no small thing.

Fatima said that very same night, these men, the Taliban, are not committed to human dignity.

Their eyes are looking all the time at how to have power, and how to demean anyone who wants to think and dream.

But it is our thoughts and dreams that need to be preserved and saved. Our faith lives there, in our hearts and in our minds. And perhaps shockingly, Saad was asked by some Christians at Open Doors, what is it that you would like most from your brothers and sisters in the West?

And his response was prayer. Probably obvious in one sense, but also, I think, surprising. The thing Saad says they need more than anything else is our prayer.

[ 2 : 33 ] The world to Fatima and Saad looks so very, very big. And the temptation would be to see God as very, very small. And so it begs the question, what should we be praying for them?

What would you tell them and pray for them to encourage them to keep going? On a global scale, the persecution of Christians, I was shocked to see when I was doing the prep for this talk, actually, is sadly on the rise.

A BBC report published in 2019 stated that Christian persecution worldwide is greater than that of any other people group on this earth. In fact, so bad in some areas that it looks like Christianity is going to be wiped out completely, particularly in the Middle East.

And that in some cases, the persecution of Christians is approaching the UN's definition of genocide. And similarly to Saad and Fatima, what should we say to the people suffering under such immense persecution?

When the world's hostility to them looks so great and God looks so very small, what could we possibly say or pray for them? Closer to home, I want to tell you about my friend Matt.

[ 3 : 45 ] He's a much better looking version than me. And I grew up with Matt. And we went to the same youth group at church. I practically lived around his house. In fact, I probably owe his parents

a copious amount of money in after-school dinners.

They dutifully came to my school plays. We were very close. And in many ways, I owe much of my keeping on going as a Christian to his love, support, and encouragement. I'm not sure I would be here without it.

And, you know, as you get older and people go off to different universities, he went to a better one than me, but we needn't mention it, life gets in the way. And Matt and I went off to different unis and caught up less often.

We'd see each other infrequently, perhaps every six months or so. And recently, Lynn and I went for dinner with him. He's become a big-shot food buyer for a large supermarket. And I assumed that he was still going on with his faith, because that had been the foundation of our friendship our whole lives.

And I asked him how church life was going, and he replied that he couldn't see anymore the relevance of Christianity to his life or to anybody else's. He couldn't see how it was significant to the world or why he should follow or listen to his teachings anymore.

[ 4 : 56 ] I hope it goes without saying that hearing that from him felt like a hammer blow and that it rocked my faith should go without question. In that instance, as I'm hearing that, what should I have said to myself?

What should I have prayed for myself to make sure that I keep going? I've not been alive very long. Some of you might wish I'd been alive a little bit longer. And yet this is all too familiar an occurrence for me.

Already. The world snatching yet another friend. What should I pray for myself so as not to be ground down by yet another Christian friend falling prey to the world?

Now I am sure that all of us will be able to insert their own story before that question. Friends on the cold edge of secular indifference, drifting away from their faith.

The story of yet another country like China or Afghanistan persecuting Christians and kicking out missionaries. Another news article mocking Christianity. Another scientist coming out scorning religious belief.

[ 6 : 02 ] Or even looking around this room across the two services, roughly a hundred of us in Dulwich out of the 11,000 who live here. And the temptation will be to feel utterly defeated, utterly torn down, utterly without answers.

All of us will be tempted to feel that the world is very, very big and our faith is very, very small. So what can we say to one another to encourage one another, to pray for one another?

What can we say to a world that seems so hostile to us and so much bigger than us? Now for Isaiah's initial readers, the issue of God feeling small and the world feeling terrifyingly big would have been something they were very, very familiar with.

As we saw last week, God's people are sinful from head to foot and God has decided to bring about judgment on Israel because of their continued sin against him. The judgment has taken the form of the nation of Assyria, north of Israel, conquering nation after nation as they sweep south towards Jerusalem.

I was trying to think of an illustration to get across how terrifying this would have been. Assyria feels like British Museum and snoring unless you're a history grad like me. But Assyria was the superpower of the time with an empire that spanned well over 300 years.

[ 7 : 23 ] It would be like, I think, being part of the French resistance in Paris during World War II as you hear that Belgium has fallen, sorry Maxime, Poland has fallen, Eastern France has fallen and then the German war machine arrives on the outskirts of Paris.

How would you feel as you look out on the immense army of Germany knowing that they've swept everyone aside before you and you are next? My dad did some battlefield tours when he was a history teacher which is striking, I think, that even now the scars of that war are still easily visible to this day.

It would have been utterly terrifying to be there when it took place. And that is the situation Israel and Judah were in. Assyria is coming. An unstoppable juggernaut that was tearing apart country after country as they hurtled towards the walls of Jerusalem.

And over and over God has been warning them do not trust in the world to save you, trust in me. Yet despite this command and God's assurance of deliverance, God would have felt very, very small and the world in the form of a Syrian invasion would have looked very, very big.

What does God say to his people when they are terrified of the world around them and think that God is small by comparison? This brings me on to my first point.

[ 8 : 46 ] Trust God because he is king. Trust God because he is king. God leaves his people with one and only one simple and glorious truth.

the world will not always be like this. Have a look with me at verse 2. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills and all the nations shall flow to it.

Mountains are symbolic in the Old Testament for the countries and nations and here God is making absolutely clear it is his nation his kingdom his throne will be supreme and above every single kingdom there ever shall be.

It shall be raised so high so obviously superior to any other power that has come before it or will come after it that all nations shall flow to it.

There will be no question of who is king and who is in control. And I want you to notice together notice the word shall the certainty of this in these verses shall come to pass in the latter days shall be established as the highest of mountains and all the nations shall flow to it.

[ 10 : 08 ] There is no ambiguity it shall happen. Now Max Barry is a novelist that I hope many of you won't have the misfortune of knowing or reading.

He writes sci-fi thrillers which are the kind of books I love to read but rightly my wife is embarrassed for me. For some reason I haven't quite yet grown out of the idea of spaceships, aliens and flying people with four heads being the pinnacle of literature and if you think that you can find greater literary prowess elsewhere well you've lived a very repressed childhood.

But Barry in his book *Lexicon* says this all empires fall eventually. All empires fall eventually. Now whilst I am absolutely sure that Barry has ripped that quote from an academic somewhere he's right isn't he?

The great British Empire feels a little silly to call it great still. I used to work in a cocktail bar called *Opium* in Chinatown don't ask me about it which is potentially one of the most culturally insensitive names for a workplace I've ever heard of but there you go.

The British Empire still has deep roots but it's certainly not great anymore. Reduced to cringy socially inappropriate names and the budget Olympic Games Commonwealth Games.

[ 11 : 21 ] The Roman Empire arguably the greatest of human history consigned to textbooks and inflicted on our young to teach them Latin about *Caecilius* and *Metella* sitting in a garden and if you don't get that reference count yourself lucky I'm still convinced that Latin at school is a form of psychological torture.

Or even the great Genghis Khan Julius Caesar Chairman Mao they all fall eventually. Or how about closer to our time period the great Kingdom of America apologies Sydney land of the free home of the brave and the foundation of Western democracy seemingly waning on the world stage as talks of China and India overtaking them as the world's superpower seem more and more inevitable.

All empires fall eventually. Except in this case this is a mountain and kingdom that shall come to pass it shall be established and it shall be lifted higher than any nation that has gone before it or will come after.

This is the empire the kingdom God's eternal throne God is king God always will be king and the whole world will one day see it.

And notice with me wonderfully in verses 2-3 the nation's reaction to seeing it and all the nations shall flow to it and many people shall come and say come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord to the house of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths for out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

[ 13 : 06 ] China and the CCP will one day run to the throne of God the Roman Empire will run to the throne of God the machine of secular elitism will run to the throne of God western 21st century liberal states run to the throne of God every power that has ever been or ever will be will run to the throne of God a good question at this stage is how exactly is the world going to see the raising up of God's kingdom well Isaiah does answer this question progressively through the book and I don't want to take too much away from his punchline but I wanted to point us to one verse in particular for your encouragement from Isaiah 61 so if you could flick to Isaiah 61 and I'm just going to read the first four verses this is the servant speaking the spirit of the Lord

God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor he has sent me to bind up the broken hearted to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God to comfort all who mourn to grant to those who mourn in Zion to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes the oil of gladness instead of mourning the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit that they may be called oaks of righteousness the planting of the Lord that he may be glorified they shall build up ancient ruins they shall raise up former devastations they shall repair the ruined cities the devastations of many generations you see Isaiah's answer how is God's kingdom going to be raised up is that it's at the words of the servant that the law will go out and freedom from captivity for the blind will be achieved now as I said I don't want to take too much away from the rest of Isaiah but hopefully you can begin to see how this future points to and is only possible through the work of the Lord

Jesus this brings you on to my second and final point where we'll look at the nature of God's kingdom the first point was trust God because he is king the second is trust God because his reign is the answer to all of humanity's problems trust God because his reign is the answer to all of humanity's problems I think we might be in danger somewhat when we hear that of missing the significance of how big an idea that really is we probably think as Christians of course God being lifted up is good for us we'll be proved to be right finally and everybody else will be proved wrong but it's far greater than this because God's kingdom being raised is the answer to all of the world's problems and I know what you're probably thinking Benji that feels like a bit of a non sequitur I thought you wanted one point sermons this is a weird diversion but you see it makes sense when you realize that the big question for the Israelites would have been and the big question for us are we are they going to keep trusting God in the face of the world being so big if Assyria is coming to attack them surely they need to make military alliances shore up their walls store up enough food for a prolonged siege train their army or develop new forms of weaponry but surely they must prepare and this is exactly what they did except they did so whilst the whole time

Isaiah was telling them do not put your faith and trust in these things to save you simply trust the Lord and he will deliver you from Assyria returning to our previous illustration I think that would probably be like sitting on top of the arc of triumph with a baguette and whatever else French people eat or drink looking out at the German war machine as it steadily progresses towards you already knowing that this army has defeated Belgium Poland and most of eastern France you spent years preparing your troops setting booby traps and shoring up defences but yet the whole time the pesky archbishop of Paris is telling you stop doing that I won't do a French accent stop doing that and trust in God pray that God would save you and he will defeat the German army for you you can imagine how that would have been taken as foreign policy against Nazi invasion as an aside if you want to know how that policy actually goes for Isaiah's readers you can read 36 to 39 chapter 36 to 39 later but the form the world in the form of a Syrian invasion would have looked so terrifying to Jerusalem and Judah how can they trust God when the world looks so big how can they trust that God is king well have a look with me at what God's kingship produces verses 3 and 4 and many people shall come and say come let us go up to the mountain of the

Lord to the house of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths for out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem he shall judge between the nations and shall decide disputes for many peoples and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks they learn war anymore a recent poll carried out by the think tank me found that of the users it asked the three major problems that humanity thinks is facing the world today are war famine and climate change but notice with me what is achieved by God being king in verse four and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war anymore please think with me for a minute of all the things that would have to be true for that verse to be true

[19:12] Israel and Palestine will have forgotten centuries of bad blood between them because they will see God as king and run to him tension in the US between right and left it won't exist anymore because they can come to the kingdom of our king safety will be worldwide and universal there won't be any need for nuclear deterrent Korean missile tests or end of the world nuclear war protocols trust will be ironclad between every country there'll be no more blocking of the M25 there'll be no more fear over the effects of human selfishness on climate change there'll be no more animosity between world leaders over east versus west China will no longer war economically with

America worldwide illness will no longer exist suspicion between nations will be a thing of the past and every human being can pursue flourishing under this king and his kingdom they will beat their weapons into means of farming think about that image for a second once God is seen as king all humanity will have left to do is set aside the task of living and farming because all animosity and anger and hatred and disunity and pain and fear will have been dealt with by the coming of our king their weapons will be useless because they will have no purpose the only thing they'll be good for is farming the land with see the poll got it wrong the biggest problem facing humanity is not war famine or even climate change the biggest problem is that the world does not yet recognise

God as their king now John Lennon in his song imagine which is a hideous song so apologies for bringing it up but anyway in his song imagine has got it absolutely wrong hasn't he in this song he asked man to imagine a world where there is no more religion for he argues that that will lead to a world where there is no more tension or fighting however imagine no religion is exactly the wrong answer to all of the things that the song wishes for when God is seen as king and his kingdom is upheld then as in the words of the song there'll be no need for greed or hunger a brotherhood of man imagine all the people sharing all the world we can trust God's kingship because we see that him being king is the answer to all of humans problems every other experiment to reach human flourishing has and will fail the only thing the one and only thing that leads to true human flourishing is running to

God as king I'm returning to our big question of the talk this should give us I hope such confidence when the world looks so big around us the world has absolutely nothing to offer you it cannot provide what God can provide it certainly cannot compete with his kingdom yes the world looks big but it will pass in failure as surely as the wind blows only God's kingdom will last to begin wrapping up then for Israel whilst trusting in the Lord as king might have seemed a ridiculous answer to the threat of invasion by Assyria it was the correct answer even though the world looks so very big and God so very small God's kingdom is the answer to the fear Israel felt there there is nothing better for Israel to trust in Isaiah gives them a certain look into the future of the king who they follow reigning over the whole world and his reign will never end and bring about perfect peace and so for us

I only have one implication and please do chat about it afterwards and let me know if it's encouraged you and my one implication for us is this when the world seems big fix your eyes on our king and his kingdom when the world seems big fix your eyes on our king and his kingdom for us today potentially obviously the world is full of pretend kingdoms for Saad and Fatima it is the Taliban for many Christians around the world it is the persecution of secular states for us it could be the pretend kingdom of liberal humanism perhaps my friend Matt truly believes that the kingdom of this world has more to offer him than the kingdom of our Lord he is categorically desperately and utterly wrong and can I say if you wouldn't call yourself a follower of Jesus here today thank you so much for coming you're very welcome but if you aren't putting your trust in the Lord Jesus then you are worshipping the wrong king and you are part of the wrong kingdom David Foster Wallace who is an atheist philosopher writing in 2005 had this to say about worship there is no such thing as not worshipping everybody worships the only choice we get is what we worship and outside of belief in God or higher power anything else you worship will eat you alive if you worship money and things you'll never have enough if you worship your body beauty and sexual allure then you will die a thousand deaths as you get old and that on one level we all know already if you do not worship the Lord Jesus then you worship a pretend king and a pretend kingdom which will ultimately come to nothing I implore you to take seriously the claim in these verses that only in pursuit of God's kingdom is found true human flourishing please worship that king and [ 25 : 20 ] I hope Christian and atheist alike this should radically change where we view solutions for the world's problems from I wonder how hopeful you are that COP26 will fix the world's climate issues or that the UN which ironically has the final verse of our passage as its motto will actually be able to achieve world peace or that education will solve world inequalities or that even your own life will be enough to bring you satisfaction and joy the answer to all of those things are only and exclusively found in and closer to home for many of us and many of our friends in Dulwich the temptation will be to believe the pretend kingdoms of education for our children has more to offer them than the kingdom of our Lord or perhaps it will be the pretend kingdom of economic prosperity and comfort or quiet anonymity to get on with our lives all of these kingdoms are pathetic pretenders to the throne they seem so very big but they are so very very small they will never last

and they do not and cannot provide what they promise

God as king is the answer to all of human flourishing friends when we are tempted to feel like the world is so very big and our faith is so very small please please remember this one truth the pretend and mock kingdoms of our world cannot offer you anything you will not find lasting happiness or joy in them they are pretenders to the throne when the world seems big fix your eyes on God our king why don't I lead us in prayer dear lord thank you that you are king and you always will be king please lord would you help us all here to live king