

Isaiah - Talk 8

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- [0 : 0 0] We're reading from Isaiah chapter 10, starting verse 5, that's page 693 in the Church Bibles. Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff in their hands is my fury.
- Against a godless nation I send him, and against the people of my wrath I command him, to take spoil and seize plunder, and to tread them down like the mire of the street.
- But he does not so intend, and his heart does not so think. But it is in his heart to destroy and to cut off nations not a few. For he says, Are not my commanders all kings?
- Is not Kalno like Kachemish? Is not Hamath like Apad? Is not Samaria like Damascus? As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols, whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols, as I have done to Samaria and her images?
- When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the speech of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria and the boastful look in his eyes.
- [1 : 1 5] For he says, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding. I remove the boundaries of peoples and plunder their treasures.
- Like a bull I bring down those who sit on thrones. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples, and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken, so I have gathered all the earth.
- And there was none that moved a wing or opened a mouth or chirped. Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it, or the sword magnify itself against him who wields it, as if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood?
- Therefore, the Lord God of hosts will send wasting sickness among his stout warriors, and under his glory a burning will be kindled like the burning of fire.
- The light of Israel will become a fire, and his holy one a flame, and it will burn and devour his thorns and briars in one day. The glory of his forest and of his fruitful land the Lord will destroy, both soul and body, and it will be as when a sick man wastes away.
- [2 : 2 8] The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few that a child can write them down. In that day, the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on him who struck them, but will lean on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth.
- A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people Israel be as a sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will return.
- Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. For the Lord God of hosts will make a full end as decreed in the midst of all the earth.
- Therefore, thus says the Lord God of hosts, O my people who dwell in Zion, be not afraid of the Assyrians when they strike with the rod and lift up their staff against you as the Egyptians did.
- For in a very little while my fury will come to an end, and my anger will be directed to their destruction. And the Lord of hosts will wield against him a whip as when he struck Midian at the rock of Oreb.

- [3 : 35] And his staff will be over the sea, and he will lift it as he did in Egypt. And in that day, his burden will depart from your shoulder and his yoke from your neck.
- The yoke will be broken because of the fat. He has come to Ayath, he has passed through Migron. At Mishmash, he stored his baggage. They have crossed over the path.
- At Jibah, they lodge for the night. Ramah trembles. Jibah of Saul has fled. Cry a law aloud, O daughter of Galim. Give attention, O Laisha.
- O poor Anathoth. Madmanah is in flight. The inhabitants of Gebim flee for safety. This very day, he will halt at Nob. He will shake his fist at the mount of the daughter of Zion, down the hill of Jerusalem.
- Behold, the Lord God of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power. The great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low. He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe, and Lebanon will fall by the majestic one.
- [4 : 46] Well, good morning, and very well done, Julian, with those names. I'm very impressed. Why don't I lead us with a prayer as we start. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy.
- Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. Father, please forgive us for all the ways in which we fear this world, far more than we fear you. Please, this morning, would you enlarge our view of you, and would you become bigger in our minds and our hearts.
- Amen. We have a fear problem. So many of us as Christians live as though, think as though, the world has won and God has lost.
- We live a Christian life dominated by fear of the world. We live in fear, not in victory. Well, what do I mean by that? Well, let's do a thought experiment.
- What is it that gives you confidence that God is real and that Jesus died and wrote? What do you think about to give yourself reassurance? I think often, and it's certainly the case for me, it's apologetics.
- [6 : 04] Now, apologetics is just a posh word for the study of historical facts and arguments that make us sure of the truths in our faith. And it's wonderful that God has given us those things. I find them helpful.
- But why is it that apologetics is the thing we often turn to when we're afraid? For me, and I wonder if it's the same for you, I think it's because I am afraid.
- I'm afraid the Bible isn't enough on its own to persuade me and the world that Christ really is my king, your king, and the world's king. I'm afraid.
- Afraid of looking or feeling stupid. I think the Bible needs me to apply my intellect to prove to myself and the world around me that no, no, no, no, no, you don't understand, guys.
- We're intellectually viable. We actually aren't backward thinkers or stuck in the suspicions of the past. We're liberal-minded, clever, western, 21st century thinkers just like you. We're winners just like you.
- [7 : 04] I fear that sometimes I use apologetics to pretend to the world that I'm not a loser. I use it to hide from the world because I'm afraid that the world will think I'm a loser.
- But why am I saying that? Why am I so desperate to prove to myself and to the world the validity of my faith? Well, it's because I'm afraid. Afraid that they will think I'm stupid, backwards, or homophobic.
- I have a fear problem. And this comes out every time someone asks me what my job is, which is pretty much exclusively in a coffee shop. I feel an immense sense of fear and pain.

I don't want to tell them what I do. That I spend 20 to 30 hours a week studying a 2,000-year-old book about a dead slave on a cross who was king of the universe. I don't want to see that look of, oh, that's cool, when really what they're thinking is either that I'm a homophobe or they don't really even understand how that's a job that takes six days a week.

I have a fear problem. So I have a choice to make when they ask me, right, am I a winner in Christ or am I a loser? Has Christ beaten the world or not?

[8 : 23] Will I live in fear of this world or in fear of God? Which am I going to choose? Now it might not be apologetics that shows this up in our thinking. What keeps you awake at night?

What are you fearful of? Is it financial instability? Is it the exam coming up at school? Is it the prospects that our kids have from school? Is it the desire for a particular job or job interview?

Is it fear of man at the idea of inviting them to a carol event or to see you or to read the Bible with them? Do we think that some people are just too far gone to share the gospel with them, too in love with the world?

Or do we just use that as an excuse to hide from the fact that we are more afraid of the world than we are of God? We have a fear problem. And as you think about that, and I really name what that is in your mind, ask yourself, are the things that I am afraid of, things that the Lord has told me in his words he has victory over?

Because if they are, we are not living as a winner. We are living as though God has lost to the world. We are living in fear of the wrong thing.

[9 : 36] We have a fear problem. Now, I only have one goal for today's talk, so if you're going to listen to anything I say today, please make it be the next 30 seconds. And that goal is to solve our fear problem.

We all have a fear problem, and God intends on correcting it. And surprising, you might be surprised to know, it is not that I want to persuade you that the world is not scary.

Because it is. And yet, our fear is in the wrong place. I want to persuade you instead to move your fear from fear of the world to fear of God.

I'm going to say that again, because that is my only point today. I want you to move your fear from fear of the world to a fear of God. Or to put it another way, show you that if you fear the world, you really are fearing the wrong thing.

The solution to our fear problem is to realize that God is far more terrifying than the world. We're still on our introductory point. The temptation to live in fear for our initial readers, God's people, would have been an overwhelming one.

[10 : 44] As we've been seeing over and over, this part of Isaiah is all about Assyria. Assyria is very, very powerful. The biggest power, in fact, until Rome. They are winners in the world's eyes, if there ever was one.

If it's justified to be afraid of anyone in this world, it's Assyria. And this terrifying power has set its greedy gaze on taking Judah for themselves.

And to be honest with you, there was absolutely no reason for thinking they'd be unable to do so. We see from other bits of Isaiah, 13 chapters, in fact, that Assyria conquered everyone everyone they set their sights on, obliterated them, country after country, as they passed on their way to conquer Jerusalem.

And make no mistake, Jerusalem was a tiny city in a tiny coastal town, country, a loser to the rest of the world. So I hope you can see why the people in Jerusalem might be afraid.

The threat was literally murder and destruction. And the Assyrians, well, they're A-star pupils at it. You can empathize a bit why they might be living as though God isn't king and Assyria can beat God, why they are living in fear of the world and not fear of God.

[12 : 03] And this passage is basically God's response to that choice. A key verse for our section is the one that I read in our prayer at chapter 8, verse 13 to 14.

Have a look with me. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honour as holy. Let him be your fear and let him be your dread.

And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offence and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

God intends his people to fear him and fear him alone. However, Israel think God is a loser and if they back him, they will lose too. They are afraid of the world and they are not afraid of God.

They have a fear problem. Well, let's see what God has to say about that choice. What is God's answer to their fear problem? What is God's answer to our fear problem?

[13 : 03] And this leads me on to my first point. Yes, the world is scary. Yes, the world is scary. Now, the king of Assyria probably goes down as one of the most terrifying kings in the Bible.

I want to take us through a selection of some of the things that he says about himself. Have a look with me at chapter 10, verse 11 to 12. This is the king of Assyria speaking.

As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols whose carved images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols, that's our God he's speaking about, as I have done to Samaria and her images?

You see what he's saying? He's saying that he is a God killer. All the other countries he has defeated have their own gods and because he has defeated them, he's shown how worthless those gods are.

This is a king who not only defeats countries, he brings down gods. The king of Assyria is not only a king killer, he is a God killer and he intends to do the exact same thing to Israel's God.

[14 : 19] He will defeat Israel and by doing so, show that the winner is him and Israel and their God is the loser. He will show that he is the one to be feared above God.

And in fairness, so far, he's been entirely successful in doing so. So much so, he can even say, verse 14, have a look with me. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken, so I have gathered all the earth and there was none that moved a wing or opened the mouth or chirped.

He thinks he is powerful enough to gather the wealth of the whole world. So here you have the enemy, the competition with Israel's God, the God killer and ruler of the world versus tiny Israel and their tiny God, Yahweh.

Who wins? Who should they be afraid of? The God killer king or their Lord? And you can imagine the terror Judah must have felt at the sight of the God killer king barreling towards them.

You might be thinking this morning, they don't have a fear problem. Their fear is entirely justified. How can you fear God, you might be saying, in comparison to Assyria, the man who was a collection of other nations' gods in his palace as trophies and is on his way to add to it.

[15 : 45] It looks as though Assyria is on the verge of killing God and he has a 100% track record. Does Israel have a fear problem or is their fear entirely justified?

The world is scary. And I think whilst this might feel somewhat detached to us, actually this is a fear that all of us have. That our world is on the verge of killing God.

That we fear as though they might succeed in doing so. We fear as though they might have already succeeded. I want us to focus in on verses 10 to 11 because I think this is in many ways, for many of us here, the catchphrase of our age.

Have a look with me at verse 11 again. Shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols? He's talking about our God as I have done to Samaria and her images.

A philosopher called Nietzsche said in the 1800s that God is dead and we have killed him. It's a breathtaking claim, isn't it? Humanity has killed God. We've done away with him, you see.

[16 : 48] It's the complete reversal of what we might normally think. God the all-powerful. God the creator. God the giver of life. God the saviour. And we have killed him. It makes God look like nothing more than some dumb animal.

Something that with the weapon of our ever sharper intellect, we've put him to death. That the roles have been swapped. We've taken the place of God and put God firmly in the grave.

But that's exactly the same for many of our friends and family now. And it might even be the same for many of us in this room. You see, we've moved past God.

Progressed past him. Evolved to not need him anymore. Evolved so much, in fact, we don't even need to think about God much anymore. Sure, God is nice for a Chris Stingle. Bring the kid along.

Stick a candle in an orange. And sure, God might be nice for carols. But master of my life, no. We filled in nearly every gap that God used to fill.

[17 : 51] And it's only a matter of time before science fills in every gap for good. And God will be well and truly seen to be dead by everyone. You see, our society's ambivalence and coldness towards God, well, it's exactly the same as the Assyrian king and Nietzsche's proclamation.

God is dead. And we have killed him. And just like Assyria, it is terrifying. I don't want to patronize you this morning.

And I won't patronize you this morning. The world is scary. It is scary. Whilst we might not be on the verge of invasion, the idea that God is on the verge of being killed by our society is one I think we all come up against all the time.

We have a fear problem. Well, here in Isaiah 10, we get the answer to that fear problem. And that leads me on to my second and final points. Yes, the world is scary.

But God is scarier. But God is scarier. As Assyria barrels towards Israel, we can definitely see why they would be scared. But Isaiah reminds them and he reminds us of a detail that they have forgotten.

[19 : 02] Have a look with me at verse 15. Shall the axe boast over him who hews with it or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it as if a rod should wield him who lifts it or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood?

Do you see what God is saying? What is Assyria? It's a tool. A tool in God's hands. He wields it.

He controls it. It's his to make do with what he wants. Being afraid of Assyria is, as far as God is concerned, utterly stupid because Assyria is a plaything in the hands of God.

They have absolutely nothing to fear whatsoever. How can you fear the created army of Assyria when the God who made them is able to do away with them as easy as putting down an axe or a staff of wood?

Well, to put it another way, the question of who wins between an axe and the person holding an axe is easy. You just put the axe down. That is how easy it is for God to defeat Assyria.

[20 : 17] He just drops it. Now, I want to tell you about one of the greatest literary masterpieces ever told. It's a story of pathos, beauty, righteousness, joy.

I am, of course, talking about The Three Little Pigs. Now, for those of you who don't know, The Three Little Pigs is arguably the greatest story ever told. Okay? With me? There are three pigs and they're being pursued by a hungry wolf and each of the pigs tries to hide from a wolf in a different house.

The first house is made of straw and I've drawn this for us so that we're clear on what we're seeing. That is straw, by the way, in case any of you know issues. The first house is made of straw and the little pig runs into the house, locks the door.

Not entirely sure how you lock a straw door but there you are. And he hopes and prays that the house of straw will be enough to stop the wolf eating him. Sadly, straw is not enough.

The wolf is a trumpet player, apparently, and blows the house down and eats the pig. Look at that. Very sad. The wolf, though, is not finished and so he moves on to hunt the second pig.

[21 : 26] This pig thinks perhaps if straw doesn't work maybe wood will and I had to have some help to get that incredible wood decor that you see before you. Anyway, and so he hides in a house made of wood.

Sadly, yet again, this does not work. The wolf blows. The wood house falls down and the second pig, too, is eaten. Very sad. And the wolf moves on to the third and final pig who has a choice about what he is to do.

Now, in this illustration, okay, I hope it's obvious because it is brilliant, the wolf is Assyria. Okay, yeah, great. See what I did there? That is some powerful metaphor. And the third pig is Judah.

Assyria, the big bad wolf, has eaten all the enemies that have come before it and now Assyria is here to eat the final pig. Who wins? The big bad wolf or God?

But you see, this is where my brilliant illustration breaks down. Because who wins isn't even the right question.

[22 : 29] Because God is not the house. God is not helping the pig build the house. God is not even the stone the pig is thinking about using to build the house with.

God is the illustrator. You see, God can just rub the wolf out. remove the character entirely. With the end of his pencil, the wolf is gone and God's character, the pig, wins.

Assyria is a plaything in the hands of God. He made them. They are nothing more than a tool or a staff in his hand. If he wants to put them down, he can.

It's as easy for him as dropping something to the floor or rubbing something out. It's worth pausing here to really feel the weight of this power and I want us to look at a similar verse in the New Testament in Hebrews chapter 1.

You don't need to turn to it, I'll just read it for us from the screen. You, Lord, that's referring to the Lord Jesus, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning and the heavens are the work of your hands.

[23 : 39] They will perish but you remain. They all wear out like a garment. Like a robe, you will roll them up. Like a garment, they will be changed but you are the same and your years will have no end.

Jesus will roll up creation like a mat. Have a think about that for a second. I don't know how heavy the world is and I don't know how heavy the sun is but ending the world is as easy for Jesus as you picking up a dishcloth.

So when God calls the greatest army of the medieval age nothing more than a piece of wood in his hands, you can be absolutely sure he means it and ending the Assyrian invasion is as easy for God as putting down an axe, dropping a staff or picking up a piece of wood.

You see, the people of Judah had got it absolutely wrong. They had a fear problem. They feared the axe instead of the person holding the axe who was God.

So in the battle between creatures and creator, who wins? Where should their fear be placed? Well, in God.

[25 : 00] As has been mentioned, God killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers at the gates of Jerusalem in answer to just one prayer from one king. If you want to read about it, it's in Isaiah 36-39.

In other words, God rubbed out the wolf and in doing so, he showed his people that Assyria and the world is nothing in comparison to him.

He alone is the one true God. He alone is the winner and the world is the loser. In fact, it was never even in doubt. It isn't even a competition.

God is the creator, the illustrator of history's story. Defeating the world is as easy for him as rubbing out a pencil drawing on a piece of paper. Why should God be your fear and dread?

Because he is far more powerful, far more terrifying than the world. I hope you're starting to see where our fear should be placed. So for us, as we conclude, we have a fear problem.

[26 : 06] Now, when I was preparing this, there are so many ways in which I think this plays out. Originally, I think I had about nine points of application, but you'll be pleased I've reduced it to one. I could talk about how we have a fear problem when we fear man but not God, but I won't.

I could talk about how we have a fear problem when we fear our missing out on this life with sport or money or our children's education instead of living for the one true God, but I won't.

I could have also spoken about how we fear the wrong things for our children when we fear the exam board for them rather than the Lord, but I won't. Instead, I want us to focus on one command where I think this fear shows up most acutely, and it is the command on your screens from Matthew 28.

Go and make disciples of all nations. It has not been obeyed. Just under half of the world has never yet heard the gospel.

That's 3.8 billion people. What are we going to do about it? What are we going to say about it? Because you see, it does concern us.

[27 : 18] It concerns us supremely, for we are the people that God will hold responsible. God has not told the angels to preach the gospel to the lost.

The unconverted are not responsible for preaching to the unconverted. They have much to answer for, but neglect of gospel proclamation to the lost is not one of them.

God does not expect the unconverted to carry the gospel to the lost. He expects his disciples to do it. This privilege, and it is the greatest of privileges, of carrying the saving message of Christ crucified to the lost, has not been granted to others.

The charge has been entrusted exclusively to us. What then would we say if our master returned today, of which he could, and found that after more than 20 centuries, half of the world is still un-evangelized?

The command was plain, the gospel proclaimed to every creature. The fact is simple. Billions have never heard it. What are we going to say?

[28 : 36] I am, myself, for what it's worth, utterly at a loss to answer that question. I think this is probably the hardest passage I've ever prepared, not because I think it's difficult to understand, but because it had me weeping, as I realized over and over that fear, fear in the wrong place, fear in man and not in God, has led me to ignore this command over and over again.

And I looked for an excuse, some way to answer his question, because the Lord will ask me, and he will ask you. If our master returned today to find billions of people un-evangelized and looked, as of course he would look, to you and I for an explanation, I can't imagine what explanation I could give.

But I am utterly convinced that all of the excuses that I make and we make now with good conscience to not share the gospel or go into gospel work, things like financial responsibilities, sensible saving for retirement, family first, fear of offence, need to win a hearing, not gifted enough, whatever it is that you insert in there that stops you from telling the gospel, well whatever those excuses are, we will be wholly and completely ashamed of when he turns his gaze on us to ask us directly.

We do not think enough what it means that the lost, so easily accessible by us with our resources and training here who are perfectly able to understand and receive the gospel, their greatest and eternal need, are perishing in their billions because we do not share it.

And the reason for that, one of the main reasons, if not the only reason, plain and simple, is because we do not fear God. We fear man or we fear missing out on the pathetic trinkets of this world or we fear that it might not be a sensible decision or whatever the case may be, we fear the wrong thing.

[30 : 46] Now I have not been here in Dulwich very long but I am certain that there are people in this room who have immense gifts in Bible teaching and the question I don't think is should you use them, the question is why are you not using them in a full-time capacity?

Now you may have good reasons and we do need Christians in the workplace but if it's because of fear then you are fearing the wrong thing and as you think about those reasons don't imagine telling them to your wife or to me or to your friends but imagine telling them to God because he will ask you.

Because you see I think we have a greater enemy here in South London than we do than the Assyrians surprisingly and I think all of us will have experienced this when we've tried to tell our friends about Jesus and it's middle-class comfort.

The inertia it puts people in, the way it hardens their hearts, persuades them that the spiritual doesn't exist or that they don't need the gospel and they're fine on their own and it seeps into church too that it's okay to have God as a bit part player in our lives that will show up maybe on a Tuesday or a Sunday but then ignore him the rest of the week.

We are so fearful of missing out on this dying world. Lord, we live such fearful, fearful lives fearing the wrong things. The creator of the universe knows your name.

[32 : 15] He is one and he will ask you what you have done with the life he has given you. The command has been given what will you fear? Why don't I lead us in prayer as we close.

Dear Lord, thank you for the picture we've seen of you in these verses. Please forgive us for all the ways in which we do not fear you as we ought and allow fear of man to stop us living for you.

Please, Father, would you be our fear and you be our dread as we trust in you, the creator and redeemer of the whole world. Amen. Amen.