

Overturing Pride

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service on October the 25th 1998.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Overturing Pride and is from Isaiah chapter 2 verses 6 to 22.

Well, let's pray. O God, we pray that your word will humble us in your presence, that we may be exalted on that final day. Amen.

Pride comes before a fall. And time and time again in history we see examples of that.

Pride comes before a fall. Several of Shakespeare's tragedies, pride coming before a fall. We see it in those great entrepreneurs of recent years in Australia.

[1 : 22] The Alan Bonds. Pride coming before a fall. We see it in those arrogant politicians of recent years. Ferdinand Marcos.

Margaret Thatcher. Even President Suharto of Indonesia this year. Pride coming before a fall. But not only in the famous or the historical figures or the literary figures do we see pride coming before a fall.

But the little child who says so independently to his or her parents, I can do it. Let me do it myself.

And then they walk and fall. But not only in the young. We see it in the old, don't we? Our parents or grandparents who stubbornly, perhaps proudly, hang on to their independence.

Where they live, the way they live. I'm okay. I can manage. I can look after myself. Pride coming sometimes before a fall.

[2 : 34] Literally as well as metaphorically. But you see all those examples are just typical of human beings generally, aren't they? Young, old and in between. All of us. All of us.

All of us. Like to be self-sufficient. All of us like to be independent. All of us like to be able to place confidence in ourselves and our abilities and our achievements.

Pride comes before a fall. That's not just a popular quote or saying. But it's a biblical proverb from the Old Testament.

Pride comes before a fall. And when things go well, it is easy to be proud. When life is rolling on and we seem to be generating all that we need, we seem to be basically self-sufficient, our jobs, our family life, our health, etc.

All seem to be intact. Then it's easy to be proud about ourselves and our life. But pride is so, so dangerous.

[3 : 43] The Bible warns far more often against the wealthy, the self-sufficient and the independent, the proud that is, than it does against the poor and the needy.

The warnings and the dangers for Christian people are when we've got it all together, not for when we have nothing. Too often you see the wealthy are self-reliant, self-sufficient, independent.

I'm okay. But pride comes before a fall. How many people walk into church for the first time in years because they've just got a job promotion?

Or because all of a sudden their life seems to have come together? Rare, isn't it? But how often do we see people who walk into the church for the first time in years because they've just been given a terminal sentence on their health?

Or because some other calamity has struck their life, their marriage is in tatters or their job has just been lost or something else has happened? You see, the danger is when things are going well.

[5 : 02] That's when we're proud. That's when we think we've got it all together. But beware. The Bible says time and time and time and time again. Because pride comes before a fall.

In the middle of the 8th century BC, in the 750s thereabouts, for ancient Judah, part of the people of God of the Old Testament, life was pretty good.

Things seemed to be hanging together. The nation was expanding. Its military might was quite evident in the ancient world. The borders of the world.

The borders of the country were expanding. The major world power of the time, Assyria, was in a lull. It was weak for a few decades in the middle of the 8th century.

It seemed that for ancient Judah, life was fairly prosperous. The king they had was basically a good king and he'd been on the throne for a long time.

[6 : 05] Most of the first half of the century. And so it was really a case of a nation that was largely self-sufficient, self-reliant, independent, strong, secure.

It was very much like and reminiscent of the glory days of King Solomon. The borders being expanded once again. The wealth of the nation being obvious to all.

But pride comes before a fall. Because the people of Judah, of the middle of the 8th century BC, had neglected the earlier warnings of the Old Testament.

That your wealth does not come from the strength of your hands, your own ability or achievement, but from God. And in all their pride, they'd neglected God.

They thought that they'd done it. That they were self-reliant and self-secure and self-sufficient and independent. Pride comes before a fall.

[7 : 13] And it's in this context that the prophet Isaiah speaks. In the middle of the 8th century BC, in the latter days of King Uzziah's great and glorious reign, Isaiah the prophet speaks.

The words that we've seen the last two weeks and the words that continue tonight in chapter 2, verse 6 to the end of the chapter. For you have forsaken the ways of your people, O house of Jacob, condemning the people for going astray from their origins as a spiritual people.

And then it talks about what their land is full of. Indeed, they are full of diviners from the east.

And of soothsayers like the Philistines. They're from the west. That is, it seems they've picked up the occult type practices of other nations around about.

Yes, probably they've been doing a lot of trade. Probably there's a lot of to-ing and fro-ing in fairly peaceful times in these decades. And they thought that the way to determine their destiny, to manipulate the gods, to guarantee a sure and certain future, was to be like those other nations, to have diviners, who could look into the future in some crystal ball, or perform some magical tricks, who could predict the future.

[8 : 38] From east or west, it didn't seem to matter. However, the people of God had taken on board all those pagan occult practices of the nations around about.

Indeed, the end of verse 6 says, they clasp hands with foreigners. That is, in a sense, of a relationship. Clasp hands, shaking on a deal. Not just to do with trade, but to do with religious things as well.

They were buying into the pagan religions of nations around about. Oh yes, the land is filled with silver and gold and there's no end to their treasures.

That's a great statement of prosperity. The land is filled with horses and there is no end to their chariots. The land's not filled with horses because it's the spring racing carnival.

It's a sign of military strength. For our day and age, it'd be our land is full of nuclear missiles or something like that. Horses and chariots were the sign of strength, militarily speaking, in the 8th century BC.

[9 : 46] Yes, the land was full of all these things. But it was also full of idols. In verse 8, they bowed down to the work of their hands to do what their own fingers have made.

To what their own fingers have made. You see, in all their strength and all their pride and their self-security and their independence, they put God out of the equation.

They'd sidelined him and marginalised him. They thought that all their strength was their own doing and it seemed that the easier religious way was to adopt the pagan practices of the nations round about.

After all, those gods weren't quite so demanding as the God of the Old Testament is. The word that Isaiah uses for idols in verse 8 is a derogatory term, a dismissive term.

They're non-entities, really. Sort of a play on little gods, but they're really no gods at all. This description of Judah of Isaiah's day is reminiscent of Solomon's day, full of glory, full of strength, full of wealth.

[10 : 53] Horses and chariots were Solomon's in abundance. We know that his land was full of wealth because the Queen of Sheba came all the way from Sheba to see it and saw the opulence

and extravagance of Solomon's day.

Judah's day in Isaiah's time is approximating what it was like in Solomon's day. But for the reader of the Old Testament who knows that past history, red warning lights ought to be flashing.

Solomon's day was full of glory, but where did it end up? Solomon married many, many women and they led him into pagan worship to idols.

That's what's happening here in ancient Judah. Yes, it's full of strength and wealth and so on. Signs that could be interpreted as God's blessing, but it's also full of idols, just like Solomon's days ended up.

Even the great King Solomon went astray in his later years. And Uzziah, the current king, another great king who's generally spoken of well in the Old Testament, he, we're told in 2 Chronicles, had his heart lifted up.

[12:07] That is, his heart proud with his achievements and the strength and glory of his nation. All the warnings of the early part of the Old Testament are not being heeded in Isaiah's Judah.

While on the one hand, this description in verses 6 to 8 seems to resound, to redound with the glory of Solomon's day, it is also quite stark in its contrast to what we saw last week.

Last week we saw a picture of the end of times, of Jerusalem being exalted above all the other nations and people from every nation streaming into Jerusalem to walk according to the ways of the Lord and then go out to spread the word of the Lord and to live in his light in the rest of the world in peace.

But this description now of Isaiah's Judah is very different. In the first picture that we saw last week, Jerusalem influences the world.

That is, it's from Jerusalem that the influence goes out and so the world will walk in the ways of the Lord. But here it's the opposite. Here it's the ways of the people from the east and the Philistines from the west that are being brought into Jerusalem.

[13:26] The influence works the opposite direction. In the first picture, the glorious picture of Jerusalem, it's full of peace where all the things of armaments, the weapons are destroyed and made into plowshares and so on.

But now, the description of the reality is a description of war, of chariots and horses. In the first description last week, we see a picture of godly living, people walking in the light of the Lord and in the ways of the Lord.

But now, no, we see occult practices, pagan practices and idols. And in the former picture, we see Jerusalem, symbolic for God's people and Judah, being lifted up and exalted in the world as the highest mountain, the most glorious of peoples.

But now, in God's judgment, he's bringing his people down, bringing them low in judgment for their sin.

Verses 9 and 10 are full of mockery. And so people are humbled and everyone is brought low. Do not forgive them.

[14:46] Enter into the rock and hide in the dust from the terror of the Lord and from the glory of his majesty. It's full of mockery because Judah is not humble.

The only thing it is humbled before are its idols, the works of its own hands. It's only before idols that Judah bows down. But God will humble it in judgment.

God will bring down the proud in their conceit. Pride comes before a fall and it's God who is the agent of that fall.

Isaiah is mocking their pride. He's mocking their lack of humility. You think you're humble? You're bowed down, you're humble before idols. But before almighty God, he will make you humble in judgment and punishment.

And so Isaiah says, do not forgive them. What a harsh prayer to pray. Completely justified. Their practice doesn't warrant forgiveness.

[15:57] You can't forgive them, God. Isaiah recognizes that sin is a problem. It needs to be dealt with. And God would not be right to offer this people forgiveness for these terrible sins of idolatry.

So often the prophets plead and plead with God at various times. Moses did and Jeremiah did. Pleading with God to forgive his sinful people. Amos did.

But Isaiah, no. Do not forgive them, God. They've gone too far. And then Isaiah continues the mockery when he taunts them in effect by saying, come on, enter into the rock and hide in the dust from the terror of the Lord.

You cannot hide from God. Of course you cannot hide from God. Isaiah knew that. He's mocking them. He's saying you can't hide. You think you can get in a cave from God and hide from him? No way. You might be able to hide from your man-made idols, but you cannot hide from God at all. The God who the psalmist said searches our hearts and knows where we are, whether we're in the depths or the heights.

[17:01] He knows us and finds us. The God from whom nobody could hide effectively in the book of the Revelation at the end of the Bible. There is much about Judah's society in our own day and age, it seems to me.

In his day as in ours, there is pride of humanity on every street corner. Science, the glory of human ingenuity and achievement and ability and intellect.

That's pride. Pride of wealth. Glorifying in mansions and shares and the power of wealth, whether it's in politics or casinos or the media or in sport.

The great idolatry of terrific sporting achievements. Or the pride of politics. Of politicians who claim so arrogantly time and again to have done this or done that or my government's done this or my achievement is that.

Pride of jobs or intelligence. My job's better than yours, although we don't say it quite so blatantly, but that's what happens at every party, isn't it? Pride. Pride.

[18:24] But the sad thing is that in our society, pride is one of its virtues. We're told to take pride in what we do. We're told to be self-sufficient and independent and secure.

We're told to guarantee our own futures, not to rely on anybody else. That's pride and it's the goal for so many people in our society.

You see it in young people who strive before their time to be independent from their parents and you see it in old people who hang on stubbornly and proudly trying to remain independent beyond their time.

The pride of our world says that God is just a crutch for the weak. But this issue of pride raises questions for us as Christians about what do we really rely on in this life?

How much store do we place on our beauty, on our wealth, our income, our jobs, our health, our families, our houses? And everything else.

[19:32] How important is it for us to be independent, to be secure, to guarantee our own futures, to have a career path that's well mapped out?

You see, our idols are just as impotent as theirs. And when the glory of God's majesty is revealed, they will also be as nothing before him as the idols of Isaiah's day were as well.

I sometimes wonder how proud people will react on that judgment day, the day when the glory of God's majesty is revealed for all to see. I wonder how many of the great media tycoons of our day will try and bargain with God to buy God out on that judgment day.

I wonder how many of the great achievers, whether in sport or in politics or business, will try to reel off their honor list before God and say, God, look at all the things that I've done and achieved, the glory that has been mine in this world.

I remember a woman who didn't go to church that I visited several years ago in parish ministry. She said, oh, I don't go to church, but I've got faith.

[20:50] And I asked her, well, what do you have faith in? And she paused, not expecting a question. And she said, well, I've got faith in fellow human beings.

And I said to her, I am very sorry for you because I'll always let you down. I have faith in God and he doesn't. But you see, there's just a little snippet of human pride in the end.

And on that day when God's glory is revealed in his majesty, that will all count as nothing. For the people of Judah, they thought that the day of the Lord would be a day of great glory and comfort. The day when God would defeat their enemies and establish Jerusalem above every other nation and make sure that the people of Judah were secure within Jerusalem's eternal walls protected by God.

A day to look forward to, come Lord Jesus or the equivalent to Old Testament. But Isaiah is correcting their false security when he talks about the judgment day of God.

[21:59] It will be a great reversal, the opposite of what you expect. The haughty eyes of people, they'll be brought low, he says in verse 11. The pride of everyone shall be humbled and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day.

For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high. All the self-reliance and pride of human beings will be shattered and brought down.

The great reversal will begin. And Isaiah gives examples in verses 13 to 16 of this. God will be against the cedars of Lebanon and the oaks of Bashan, not because he picks on those particular trees, but because those trees were marks of religious worship and pride.

We saw about the oaks in chapter 1 last week. He'll also be against the high mountains and the lofty hills, not because he's got a fear of heights, but because God will be against all those religious institutions that place themselves on top of hills.

He'll bring them down. He's against every high tower and fortified wall, not because forming walls to get security in the ancient world was bad in itself, but because of the pride that people placed in their own security and military might.

[23 : 16] It'll all come to nothing on that day, says God. He'll also be against all the ships of Tarshish and against all the beautiful craft. Poor old Tarshish, wherever that was. Poor old ships of Tarshish, for that matter.

But what it's against is that pride of human trade, the economic superiority that Uzziah's day was trying to establish in the ancient world. All of it will come to nothing.

The summary statement of verse 17 repeats verse 11 again. The haughtiness of people shall be humbled, the pride of everyone shall be brought low, and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day.

I wonder whether you remember this scene in the film Titanic, where the ship is going down and the first class passengers are getting into their lifeboats and trying to bring along all their wealthy possessions with them and there's not enough room really for them and so on.

It's a pathetic scene really of people clutching to wealth, people proud in the face of death. That's similar here really because on this day of judgment when God will bring Judah down in its pride, people will run to flee from God and the picture is of them clutching all their idols, trying to carry them along.

[24 : 39] But you see, idols don't save. They have to carry their idols and in the end, in their terror and fear, they will throw them away to the rodents who will just nibble them up.

That's how pathetic they are in clinging to the things on which they attach their pride. So verse 19 says, Enter the caves of the rocks, the holes of the ground, from the terror of the Lord and from the glory of His majesty when He rises to terrify the earth.

That is, Isaiah is mocking them, saying, flee, flee. This will be a terrible day. And on that day, people will throw away to the moles and to the bats their idols of silver and their idols of gold which they made for themselves to worship.

They'll throw them away because they're too heavy to carry. It's too desperate a situation to try and clutch their idols into the equivalent of Titanic's lifeboats. If they're going to flee into the caverns and the clefts of the hills and flee from God's terror, then those idols do them no good at all.

That's why verse 18 says, The idols shall utterly pass away. In the face of God's judgment, they're nothing. They're absolutely no help. In fact, they're the opposite. They're a burden. And so they'll cast them off.

[25 : 53] This is a great mockery of human religion, isn't it? Because any religion that's not biblical religion is really a human construction in the end. And any religion that's not biblical religion that is a human construction is actually in the end a burden and not a help.

It is only the God of the Bible who helps and saves. Any other God or idol is a burden that leads to defeat and death. This is a warning to us to make sure our religion's right, to make sure the God whom we worship is the right one.

It's no good to say, well, it doesn't matter what God I worship. I'll worship which one ever I choose. There is only one right God. Not a politically correct thing to say in our day and age, but true nonetheless.

So make sure that in all the choices you make in life, you worship the right God. Because on the day of judgment, if you worship the wrong one, you'll be found wanting.

This description of destruction is a bit like an earthquake and we know that in Isaiah's day there was one. But that wasn't the day that in the end he's talking about. He's talking about the end judgment and the earthquake of his own day was probably a portent, an omen or a warning sign of what the end would be like.

[27 : 18] A massive earthquake. A cosmic shake-up. But on that final day, only one thing will be exalted. God.

The pride of humanity will be brought low and God alone will be exalted above all. But for us who stand beyond the New Testament, we understand a little bit more of what it means for God to be exalted on that final day.

For we know that the God who will be exalted on that final day is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. The one whom the New Testament tells us that at that final day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.

He's the one who will be exalted on that final day. And before him the world will fall in humble judgment or humble praise and salvation.

And the implications for God's people are immense. That if we now humble ourselves before him on that day we along with him will be exalted by God.

[28 : 35] That's the picture that we saw last week of Jerusalem being lifted up and exalted above all else. That's faithful Jerusalem. And if we remain faithful to the real God by humbling ourselves before him now and doing away with all human pride now then the great reversal will be that we will be exalted then with him.

But for those who exalt themselves now in human pride their great reversal will be to be brought down low in judgment on that final day.

The tables will be turned when God's glorious majesty is revealed for all to see. You see the greatest human glory comes not from attempting to be God now.

Not from attempting to be so independent and self-sufficient that we are our own gods now. The greatest human glory comes from submission to God now and eternal exaltation in glory then.

It's a paradox of faith. Exalt yourself now and be brought down in judgment but humble yourself now in faith and be lifted up for eternity in glory crowned in heaven.

[30 : 04] So Isaiah's plea at the end of this chapter is this turn away from mortals that is from human pride turn away from it from mortals who have only breath in their nostrils for what account are they?

You see all the human capability all the human beauty the IQ the strength the achievement the honour list that people will present towards God on that final day it's breath it's a vapour it's a puff of air that's what it means it's vanity the same word as in Ecclesiastes 1 it's nothing on that final day but trust in God trust in the God of the Bible trust in the God whose own son demonstrates for us the paradox the son who humbled himself on earth and was lifted up in glory beyond his death Jesus you see is the model of the great reversal that's why he came his mother sang in Luke chapter 1 and he is the model for that servant later in Isaiah the one who died despised and rejected brought low and humbled but vindicated by God himself the book of Isaiah is a book calling us to trust in God not ourselves not anything else or any other so-called

God or idol in God we trust the US dollar bill says it even if most Americans don't believe it but it is what we are to believe and act upon in God we trust no one else and nothing else you