

SUMMER 4 - In Whom Shall We Trust?

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[0 : 00] This wonderful passage from your prophet Isaiah, we pray that you'll give us eyes to see and ears to hear words of comfort and gospel truth, that we may live them out for the praise of your glorious grace. Amen.

Amen. In chapter 39, King Hezekiah is a foolish king and he shows off all his treasury to the king of the Babylonians.

And God says to him that in response to his foolishness, there will come a time when the Babylonians will take away that temple treasury. Those events occurred right at the end of the 8th century BC.

Probably just before the turn of the century into the 600s. And it will be just over another hundred years before the Babylonians became a world force, conquered the Assyrians in 612 and 610. And then they set their minds to conquer other nations round about. In 597, they came to Jerusalem. This time Jerusalem capitulated without a struggle.

[1 : 21] The city stood. But the leading people of the city were taken off as promised by God into exile. The king was replaced by a Babylonian puppet king, another son of Josiah.

Prophet like Ezekiel was taken off into exile in Babylon. No doubt many of the government, the leading people, the officials, the wealthy as well. And for 10 years, Jerusalem tottered as a Babylonian province.

During the later part of that 10 year period, the king decided to rebel against Babylon. Babylon had just fought an indecisive battle against Egypt and he thought he'd take his chance.

A foolish move. Babylon didn't like rebellious parts of its empire. And Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian emperor, decided it was time to teach Jerusalem a lesson it would never forget.

And so he came back to Jerusalem in 588. For 18 months, besieged the city. No food allowed in. No water allowed in.

[2 : 27] Though, of course, it had Hezekiah's tunnel to have some water supply. But gradually, the inhabitants of Jerusalem began to starve. It seems from records that they even began to sacrifice their own children in order to stay alive.

In the end, it was inevitable. The Babylonians forced through the walls of the city and they destroyed it entirely. The temple razed to its grounds.

What was remaining of the temple treasury and vessels carted off to Babylon. In those days, a nation that conquered another nation would take away the idols in the temples and shrines and place them in their own temples because it was a sign that their gods had defeated the gods of the conquered nations.

Many were killed. Another king taken into exile. Jerusalem was left as a derelict ghost town. The despair of the people is echoed several times in the Bible.

The book of Lamentations, commonly attributed to the prophet Jeremiah, is a story of grief at the fall of the city. Psalm 137, words which we probably know well.

[3 : 40] By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept. How shall we worship the Lord in a strange land? The grief of the exile. The grief of the exiles far, far away from Jerusalem in exile in Babylon.

Despair and grief. A God defeated. And yet there were signs that this was not the end.

There were indications that God was not finished with his people, even if they seemed to have been finished with him. Isaiah is not the only prophet to promise hope from the period before the exile.

When we get to Isaiah 40, the context already set last week in chapter 39, we jump ahead into the 500s, well after Isaiah's own life.

But I don't think that makes this any less Isaiah's word, though that's not necessarily a commonly held view. The exile is well and truly underway when these words apply.

[4 : 55] Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Those words are without anticipation in the book of Isaiah.

There's no build up to them, there's no transition point. We just jump from Hezekiah's own folly to suddenly, 100 years later or more, comfort, comfort my people.

Words of extraordinary tenderness, but yet words of urgency as well. Like in our own language, when things are repeated in Hebrew, especially imperative verbs, there is a great sense of urgency. Like when a prophet might say, rouse yourself, rouse yourself. Here it's comfort, comfort my people. This is a plaintive cry. We don't actually know to whom it's addressed.

But I think the ambiguity of that is, in one sense, unimportant. Because what's important is the message, not necessarily the identity of the messenger.

[5 : 58] It could be that it's future prophets because it's a plural imperative. That is, you, plural, comfort my people. But we don't exactly know to whom it's addressed.

But that doesn't matter. The comfort, the sense of comfort clearly shows that the people are suffering distress. They need comfort. They're in exile. They're in despair.

They're in trouble. They've lost their faith and hope, by and large, probably. But notice also the tenderness of the address. Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God.

Throughout the Old Testament, when God is drawing close to his people, this my God, your people, or my people, your God, denotes an intimacy of relationship.

There is a covenant relationship between the God of the Old Testament, Yahweh, and his people of Israel. I've just finished reading a book that won the Booker Prize in 97 called The God of Small Things.

[7 : 02] It's nothing to do with God, really. But in it, there's a chap who's divorced from his wife, and her second husband's died, and she comes out to India with their child, their first husband's child, and he keeps calling her my wife.

And she objects and says, your ex-wife. But there's a sense in which, for him, he wants the relationship to continue. He wants her back. He never wanted her to go in the first place. And so he's saying, in effect, the relationship can still stand.

My wife. My ex-wife. Next, ex-husband or ex-wife, she says back to him. But that's what God's saying here, you see. That despite your exile, the relationship stands.

You're my people, and I'm your God. That's a great note of comfort to people in exile. God still exists, and the relationship still exists, even though, in one sense, it looked as though they were well and truly divorced.

And Israel had gone after other gods. Despite all the breaches of covenant that they've committed, the relationship between God and his people still stands. And therefore, by implication, and it comes out clearer later chapters in this part of Isaiah, all the covenant promises still stand as well.

[8 : 19] God has not given up his people after all. The second command is in verse 2. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

It's a word of love. It's wooing love. Jerusalem's feminine. So there's a sense of the lover trying to woo back the estranged loved one.

Bring tenderness to her. Speak to her heart. A loving whisper. But not just a loving whisper. A loud cry as well. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem. And cry to her out loud.

Proclaim to her out loud that she served her term. Her penalty is paid. And she's received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

These words are being addressed to Jerusalem. That's odd. Jerusalem was, by and large, derelict.

[9 : 18] There were probably people living in amongst its ruins. In fact, we do know that in the exile period there were some people who went to the ruins of the temple and offered some sacrifices for a time. But by and large, the city's uninhabitable and probably the people who did go into her off of sacrifices lived in the countryside round about.

These words, I think, are not spoken to the city per se. They seem to be spoken to the people in exile. And it's calling them Jerusalem.

Now, again, that's a mark of subtle hope. It is like saying, I suppose, to a convict in 1790 out here in Australia, hey, England.

Because it's saying, in a sense, your identity, where you belong, is back there. And so to the exiles it's saying, you're Jerusalem.

You're God's chosen city. You're God's chosen people. You're the one to whom the promises still apply. Yes, you may be in exile in Babylon, 1500 miles away, but still there's a sense in which you are Jerusalem.

[10:27] It's a note of encouragement and comfort to people in exile. They're not actually, I think, in Jerusalem. Now, I admit there's a little bit of ambiguity here, but that's the best and easiest way, I think, to read what's going on here.

Words that are clearly addressed to people in exile. So the name Jerusalem becomes a personification, if you like, of God's people because it's anchoring their identity and hope in God's promises.

Now, in many ways, this is similar to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, which were contemporaries of this period as well. Both of them acknowledge that the hope for God's people lies not for those who are left in Judah, in amongst the ruins, but with those in exile.

That's why in Ezekiel he sees a vision of God leaving the temple and ending up in Babylon. And Jeremiah doesn't have the same vision, but he has the same conception. Hope lies with the exiles, not with those left behind.

And that's what Isaiah, I think, is saying here when he addresses them as Jerusalem. The hope for Jerusalem lies, ironically, with those in Babylon. And he says that your time of penalties ended or you've served your term, as though it's a prison term that's been served here.

[11:43] The words and the penalties paid, the debt is paid. Somebody who's gone to jail for a crime or a debt unpaid, they've served their term, they've done their penance and now they're free is the idea.

The words used also in sacrificial language in the book of Leviticus, which is full of sacrifices. And the idea of the sacrifice paying off the debt is behind the idea that's in this verse.

A satisfactory recompense, if you like, for wrongdoing has now been paid. So what that verse is saying, verse 2, is that now the time of exile is coming to an end.

That's why I think we've got to locate these verses probably in the 540s or late early 530s BC at the end of the period of exile. It also is an acknowledgement, of course, the reason for the exile is Israel's sin.

It's not because Babylon's God was stronger than Israel's God. It's not because it was just a natural event or a mistake. The reason for the exile and the destruction of Jerusalem is because God's people were a sinful people.

[12:54] But we shouldn't be surprised at that because the first 39 chapters of Isaiah have shown us that time and time again. In the end, exile was inevitable. Notice too that the end of verse 2 says double for all her sins, which at one level looks rather unfair, as though somehow they've served twice as much time as they need.

Somebody goes to jail for a five-year term for some crime, but they end up serving ten. That doesn't seem quite fair. But actually, probably this is an idiom. The word for double is the word for exact replica, if you like.

The match. And so probably, ironically, the idiom in Hebrew is saying you have received the exact amount, the double for what you... This is what you needed to do, and you've paid the double of it, the exact replica, if you like.

So you've matched the crime, if you can understand what I'm meaning. It's not saying that God is unfair here. Now, at this point, it's worth saying this.

The words of comfort that these are, are not empty words. You know when a friend of yours or a family member is sort of down in the dumps or ill or bereaved, and we say, well, they're there, it's going to get better.

[14:08] They're empty words of comfort. No one can promise that it'll get better. We should be very wary of making such empty statements, I think. But these words of comfort, from God through Isaiah, are not empty.

They have a solid basis. They have a basis in God, in God's promises to his people, and in the forgiveness of sins. And at one level, we'd have to stop and say, well, how can a period of 50 years in exile really atone or pay the debt for centuries of sin of the people of Israel?

Well, that doesn't actually seem balanced. But when we get later in Isaiah, we won't get there tonight, but into chapter 53, which for Holy Trinity people will get to on Good Friday, we see where it all gets paid, in the death of a servant who carries the sins of God's people in his death.

Well, now in verse 3, another voice. Again, we're not told exactly whom. But this opening part of the chapter release is full of unaccredited voices, so to speak.

A voice cries out, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

[15:32] Now, though the voice is unattributed, when we get to the New Testament, we see that it's attributed to John the Baptist as the forerunner of God coming.

And that's probably the right way to understand it here. Here is somebody coming before God to say, make straight or prepare the way of the Lord. Now, in the ancient world, when the emperor or the king was going to make an official journey, there would be heralds who would go up before him or forerunners who would do the ancient equivalent of roll out the red carpet, so to speak.

And they'd announce the coming of the king. And they'd prepare the road. In fact, sometimes that is literally what they had to do. The ancient roads were not always that good. This is the model that's being used here.

They're laying down the red carpet for the Lord to come. And what that's saying is something very significant. God is coming to the rescue of his people.

God is on his way. And this road is a road through the desert. Now, there's a couple of different ways of understanding this and I don't want to confuse you in saying this.

[16:50] Some people think that God is coming to Jerusalem. But as I've said, I think that Jerusalem is the way of personifying the people in exile. And it makes a whole lot more sense generally for that as well.

Because what this is saying is that God is coming to the exiles to bring them home. And it's saying roll out a road in the desert.

Now, some people think, well, how can it be the exiles? Because they wouldn't go through the desert. And from Babylon to Jerusalem, let me try and do this your way round, which means I'm looking at it from behind, Jerusalem's here, Babylon's over here, and the way to do it would be to go up and over, the fertile crescent.

In between is desert. But I think what this is saying is something a bit more significant. It's not just saying come home. It's poetic language. It's figurative. And it's saying God's going to bring you back the very direct way.

Now, literally when it was fulfilled, he didn't. They came back the normal way. But in a sense, it's saying that God is coming straight for his people with no distractions. And he's going to bring you straight back through the desert.

[17:54] That's the straight way to go. Just like when they built the freeway through here, they sort of knocked down everything in its midst and they just go straight through. They flatten all the hills. They raise all the valleys so that the cars are not going up and down, but going straight along the Kunang Valley or whatever it's called.

That's the model that's here. This is an ancient motorway or freeway being built through the Syrian desert in order to bring the exiles back home. Now, as I say, it's poetic language.

We shouldn't expect to see its fulfilment literally in the desert. But it's a great word of comfort, isn't it? It's even better than saying, well, God's going to come around the fertile crescent. And it's certainly much better than saying, well, okay, it's time to get on your bikes and come back.

God will be waiting for you when you get there. God is coming straight to you to take you back.

That's the idea. Now, that tells us something about the nature of salvation, doesn't it?

God doesn't say, hey, how about I meet you halfway? He certainly doesn't say, come on, you come over here and I'll meet you here. But God comes all the way to where his sinful people are and as we'll see in a few minutes, picks them up and carries them home.

[19:06] Salvation is entirely the work of God. We don't meet him halfway. We contribute nothing to it. We have empty hands when we receive the grace of God's salvation.

Well, the picture of verse 4, I've already explained about the valleys and the mountains being flattened out and the uneven ground being made level. I don't think anything in particular is in mind there. It's just saying this will be the easy road home and it's God's way and he's coming to get you.

But then in verse 5, the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all people shall see it together. The glory of God is revealed in many ways.

In his words, in his actions, especially his actions of judgment and salvation. It's revealed in his character in the Bible. And pre-eminently in the glory revealed in Jesus Christ.

As we see, for example, in John chapter 1, verse 14. What this is saying is that God, in rescuing his own people, will reveal his glory not to them, or not only to them, but to the world.

[20 : 28] It reminds us of where God's interests are. God's interests are in seeing his glory being perceived by the world.

You see, when he saves his people, Old and New Testament, so us included, he doesn't save us so much for our sakes, he saves us for his sake.

He saves us so that his glory can be seen in the world. And not only by us when we're saved, but by the world around about.

And if we think, well, how does the world see God's glory? Then in one sense, we've got to be ashamed, perhaps, of the way in which we live out our Christian lives and demonstrate God's glory in our so saved lives.

You see, what God is on about in Old and New Testaments is the world and its future. He's not only concerned about Israel, as though, oh, well, to hell with the Babylonians and all the rest, I don't care about them.

[21 : 29] When God chose the Jews, when God chose Abraham, he did it so that all the nations of the world would be blessed. In Genesis 12, verse 3. He didn't say, okay, I'm going to choose Abraham because I'm fed up with the rest of them.

He chose Abraham and his descendants so that through them, the world would be saved and see his glory. And that is still his purpose here.

And it is still his purpose in Jesus Christ. And it is still his purpose today. He's in the business about making people of the world see his glory.

And that is seen in salvation when people are saved and redeemed. And one day everyone, willingly or not, will subject themselves to his glory on the day of judgment when every knee will bow and acknowledge his glory, whether as saved people or as those who've refused his salvation. So that's God's purpose here. And time and again in the rest of Isaiah, it comes crystal clear as well. The servant is chosen in chapter 42 and other chapters to be a light to the nations.

[22 : 44] That is so that God's glory will be seen by the world. And so on and so forth. So never let it be said or think, well, the Old Testament's just about the Jewish people.

It's the New Testament that's about us. We're here. We're the world if we're Gentile Christians. That is of not Jewish descent. And it's for our salvation that God's glory was to be revealed here in the salvation of Jews.

But also, of course, this is a theme running through Isaiah. Remember the vision that Isaiah had in chapter 6 that in a sense forms his commission as a prophet.

He sees God high and lifted up in the Jerusalem temple and the whole earth was filled with his glory. How can it be that the whole earth is filled with his glory when now he's looking forward to the day when the glory of the Lord shall be revealed?

And I guess for one or two reasons. Namely, that people are blind to his glory. It's there.

[23 : 49] It's evident in creation and redemption in our world. There's a sense in which so many of us and many non-Christians especially are blind to that glory and do not see it unless God takes the scales from their eyes.

The earth is full of his glory. The beauty of creation speaks something of his glory. But above all, the grace of redemption speaks the glory of God greater.

And verse 5 finishes by saying, For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. This is sure. This is certain. Don't doubt this word.

God said it. And it is true. Your hearts may be full of despair and despondency and exile. But God promises you salvation.

Don't doubt it. It's true. In sharp and shocking contrast to this picture of God's glory comes a comparison now with the glory of humanity.

[25 : 00] We go from the sublime to the ridiculous almost. Another voice cries. Again, we don't know whose it is. Cry out.

And I said, what shall I cry? Probably Isaiah here. Not unlike chapter 6 when he's asked a question and offers to serve. All people are grass. Well, that's a strange thing to cry out, isn't it?

Their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades. When the breath of the Lord blows upon it, surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades.

But the word of our God stands forever. In a sense, this is perhaps even a recommissioning of Isaiah here. To speak now words of comfort in the second part of the book rather than judgment in the first.

There are lots of similarities with these first 11 verses of chapter 40 and Isaiah chapter 6, his initial commission, and I won't worry about too many of those comparisons now. Now, the command to say something and then tell him what to say draws attention to what he's going to say.

[26 : 08] If verse 6 had just said, all people are grass, you can almost skip over it. But when it's sort of highlighted by saying, a voice cries, cry out, and I say, what shall I cry? And then it comes.

It's like a formal announcement drawing attention to itself. All people are grass. In contrast to the glory of the Lord, the glory of humanity is but a fleeting idea.

Grass just grows for a time and dies. The flower of the field, it comes and goes. In one sense, it doesn't last very long. All the glory of mankind that mankind boasts in is really nothing by comparison with God's great glory.

The contrast is deliberate. It's deliberate because in Babylon, the Babylonians were boasting in their glory. Look at this wonderful city, the prime city of the earth.

They were boasting in the magnitude of their empire. They were boasting in their power and their influence and their wisdom and their sophistication and so on, and in their gods. And God here is in effect saying, it's nothing.

[27 : 21] It's like a flower of the field. Yes, it might be blooming right now, but a touch of sun and wind, boom, it's gone. There's a natural transience and temporiness about the glory of humanity.

There is some glory there, but it's so fleeting as to be nothing. Now, in some sense, this picture of the glory of the Lord is describing what Babylon's like, I suppose, and what the people are facing. But you see, it's also an encouragement to them, isn't it? They're terrified. They think Babylon's so strong, that Babylon has defeated their God back in Jerusalem, that they've got no hope of a future. And God is saying, hey, hang on a minute. What you see is not a permanent power, but a fleeting flower. It's nothing to be worried about at all, in contrast to God.

Verse 7 adds another dimension to it, because it also says, it's not just a natural cycle of a flower coming and going, but rather it disappears when the breath of the Lord blows upon it. And that surely is saying something about God's judgment.

[28 : 35] And it's saying how effortless God's judgment is. All he needs to do is go, and it's gone. That's the power of God. That's the glory of God, compared to the glory, fleeting glory of Babylon.

And then in verse 8, climax in this little section, repeating part of verse 7, the grass withers, the flower fades, but bringing out the contrast again, the word of our God will stand forever.

Notice again, it's our God, not just God, but our God. That is all the covenant promises that he said hundreds of years before to David, to Moses, to Abraham, they still stand.

Yes, in exile, the land ravaged, those promises still stand. Yes, Babylon's come and go, and Assyria's come and go, and before that, Egypt's come and go, but the word of our God still stands forever.

His promises can be trusted, even in exile, even when the historical situation in the world looks as though God is defeated and absent, those promises still stand. And today, in our daily lives, when we go off to work, when we look around the world and read the newspapers, and it seems as though God is not there, because missionaries are being killed in India, and so on, these promises of God still stand, and will stand forever.

[30 : 01] Trust them. Trust them. And then the proclamation continues. In a sense, that's a little digression, verses 6 to 8.

And now, get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings. Lift it up, do not fear.

Now, it's again, a little bit of ambiguity in this verse, because if you're reading the NIV, these words are not spoken so much about Jerusalem being the herald, but rather, somebody being a herald to Jerusalem.

The NIV says, you who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, this is what you say. The NRSV, the church Bibles, say, Jerusalem is the herald. Now, I don't think we should worry too much about this, because the process that's going on in these verses is in a sense this.

The word has come to Jerusalem, here is your God, Jerusalem, now you pass on that word to the countryside of Judah. That is to the world in effect. The word of salvation is not something to keep and bottle up, but to pass on.

[31 : 11] So, the herald has come and spoken it to Jerusalem and now Jerusalem is to speak it to the world. That, of course, is still God's plan, isn't it? That the word of salvation comes out from Jerusalem through the time of the resurrection and is going into all the corners of the world of which we are but one.

And here is your God. In a sense, he's come down that highway to exile. Here he is. Jerusalem, you people of exile, here's your God.

Now shout it out. Let the world know that your God's here to rescue you. In effect, is what this is saying. And do not be afraid.

Fear not. Do not fear. Have joy and confidence because when God comes, he comes for you, to save you.

That most common of commands in the Bible, fear not. Here it is again. as it was at Jesus' birth when God literally came to this world to save.

[32 : 18] Yes, see the Lord God comes with might. His arm rules for him. A common ancient Hebrew way of saying that his power is there.

The strong arm, in effect, that's going to bring power. The words of strong arm and so on, words that are used in the book of Exodus about God saving the people from Egypt.

And there's a lot of parallels with what God's going to do in saving them from Babylon again. His reward is with him, his recompense before him. I think the idea of reward or recompense or another way of translating that is retribution is to say that God's going to bring about this great reversal we saw a few weeks ago.

He's going to punish his enemies and vindicate his people. That's his reward recompense, I think. He's restoring the balance and he's lifting up the lowly and he's bringing down the proud and arrogant in their pride.

But then from the arm of might to the arm of compassion, from the strong arm raised in victory to the arm lowered to carry compassionately, he will feed his flock like a shepherd.

[33 : 25] He'll gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep. No doubt that sometime you've seen one of those old Bibles with those old Victorian plates in colour of meek and mild Jesus as the shepherd carrying the little lamb that's gone astray clinging to a cliff or something like that.

Sort of soft, gentle picture of Jesus. Shepherds weren't like that in these days. They were strong, muscular people. They had to be. They lived it rough and tough and they had to defend their sheep. You see, God's royal power and his pastoral tenderness go together. He's both strong and mighty but compassionate and tender at the same time.

What a wonderful picture of God. What a beautiful picture of God's two sides put together here. The shepherd as God and the shepherd as God's leader is a common theme in the Bible.

It's also common in the ancient Near East. It's not peculiar to the Bible because ancient civilizations often talked about their leaders in terms of being shepherd type figures but of course the first great king was David and he was literally a shepherd before he became king.

[34 : 46] In some ways that seems to have been an indication about the nature in kingship. David was meant to be a shepherd king who would care for, protect, provide for God's people.

We know that to be true of the Lord in Psalm 23 as we sang in the first song but we also know that at the time of the exile the leaders of Israel had failed the people and in Ezekiel 34 as part of his denunciation of the leaders he calls them false shepherds who failed to protect and lead and provide for his people and he promises that one day God would send a shepherd who would be in fact not only a descendant of David but God himself who will shepherd God's people back to safety and security and of course those words are fulfilled centuries later when the good shepherd comes on the scene the one who gives up his life for the sheep to protect them the one who goes out to find the lost while already preserving the 99 saved ones the one who passes on his shepherding role to his main disciple on the beach after the resurrection feed my sheep feed my flock feed my

lambs and that chief disciple then passes that on to other Christian leaders in the last chapter of his first letter when he acknowledges his role as being a shepherd of God's people but also acknowledges that other leaders of other congregations are also God's shepherd people the image stands you see it is about God and God's leaders who are to model

God's leadership of God's people in this world but here comes the good shepherd the one who will gather the lambs who will not only lead them back come on you just follow me but who picks up his people and carries them back what a lovely picture of the totality of salvation that's accomplished by God it's not just that Jesus leads the way for us to follow though that is in part true but as far as salvation is concerned Jesus carries us all the way in his arms back home to be with God in a few weeks time in Holy Trinity we'll see in chapter 46 how different that is from the other gods and idols of the time who people had to carry around and lug on their back in procession but this is the opposite this is the God who carries his people like that poem footprints that's in every Christian bookshop ad nauseum ad infinitum

I mean when you look along the beach and you see all of a sudden one pair of footprints gone and there's just one it's when I carried you that's the picture that's here and it is a lovely picture of God's grace stooping low to pick us up and carry us home in response to all this perhaps Israel was unconvinced how can this be here we are in exile under maybe some form of limited movement maybe some sort of form of restriction certainly under oppression certainly unable to worship their God how can this be and so the second part of this chapter is a wonderful statement of the incomparable greatness and power and goodness of God to fulfill what he's just said in these first 11 verses for them in exile they were complaining that

God had abandoned them and forgotten them we'll see that in verse 27 in a minute it seemed that probably their God was defeated by the Babylonian gods that's how the ancient world understood defeat and victory in battle for them their God was too small but that's not much different to most of us as well God is small we've often got laptop gods gods that will just sit or palm top gods that we can stuff away in our pocket that we can control that we can bottle up so to speak the God of the second half of this chapter is far far far from that so often we and so many people form a picture of God that looks like us that seems to approve and pat us on the back when we do what we want to do because God's just like us we've forgotten what the Bible says is that we are made in God's image not him in us in ours and that our image of him in us is far far from what it should be but also this passage is saying this too that if these words of comfort are to be real then they will only have substance if God is big enough to accomplish that but any laptop

[39 : 46] God any pocket God any little pet God that you might drag out when you need it on a Sunday morning is not going to accomplish the comfort that these words speak only a big God will do all that so Isaiah speaks of the greatness and grandeur and majesty and bigness of God his unrivaled uniqueness his power the fact that therefore his plans can never be thwarted yes God is great enough and loving enough to care even for little old Israel there's a reassurance here at every point so then verse 12 rhetorical questions who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span and closed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountain in scales and the hills in a balance God no one else God nobody has done that no other gods have done that notice how effortless it is as well a sense of easy competence about

God's accomplishment it's talking about him creating and when he measures the waters it's just in the hollow of his hand you imagine fitting the pacific ocean into your hand can't do it very easily marking off the heavens with a span as though the heavens are just a hand span of length compared to God's greatness who can weigh the mountains in scales we can hardly even climb some of them if creation is so mind boggling then its maker is of infinite greatness and this is very different from the ancient world's idea of creation for them in the Babylonian stories the Egyptian stories and others there are lots of gods and they're in heaven and they're often fighting and they're struggling to do things and it's through their fighting that somehow the creation's made but not in the Bible God is the effortless creator do you see any resistance to him creating in Genesis 1 not a breath

God speaks and it happens he doesn't even have to raise his voice God is the effortless abundantly sovereign and powerful creator there is no rival to him who has understood or directed the spirit mind of the Lord or as his counselor has instructed him God doesn't need advice he doesn't need a consultancy firm the ancient gods of the Babylonians Marduk for example their main god when he created he had to go and consult another god called Ea but not Ea God of the Bible creates without

consultation whom did he consult for his enlightenment who taught him the path of justice no one who taught him knowledge and showed him the way of understanding no one he's powerful and he's wise these verses are telling us they're also telling us that he's beyond understanding as well at that point I think it's worth saying just something fairly briefly it is true that

God is beyond understanding his ways are far greater than ours but that does not mean we cannot know God or know enough of him or something of him now I say that because the liberals of our day and the post-modernists of our day argue a wrong logic because God is beyond understanding therefore they say we cannot understand anything of him now that argument is very common it is very common in liberal circles it's an excuse in the end to be honest not to believe parts of the Bible that you don't want to believe that's how I think it works but philosophically it's stupid because we know that even of our best friend or spouse we might know lots and lots about them but we don't know everything in fact everything about them is beyond our understanding but it doesn't mean we don't know them but of course that analogy works even better with people that we know something of we know each other but we know far from everything in a sense they are beyond our understanding but we still know now it's very important that point very important because sometimes when we think of

God being beyond understanding we can be tricked into thinking that we're lost he's too far away he's not because he has revealed sufficient to us all he's told us all that we need and as clearly as we need for our eternal salvation in his hands yes there are things we do not know but we do not need to know them so let me encourage you God has told us enough about himself to know him forever and what we don't know we don't need to know learn now from the creation to history in verse 15 even the nations are like a drop from a bucket and are accounted as dust on the scale see he takes up the isles like fine dust now we're talking about the inhabitants of the world the nations so if God is so incomparably great if God is so much bigger and greater than the whole creation then the nations of the creation are nothing at all much really compared to God and of course the point for Israel or Judah in exile is to say well

[45 : 46] Babylon's no opposition to him God's far far greater than Babylon or any other nation for that matter they're no challenge to God's sovereignty and then in verse 16 we turn perhaps to a more religious sense Lebanon would not provide fuel enough nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering now Lebanon is a typically well forested place in the ancient world the cedars of Lebanon and so on forest after forest so it's saying here that the place where you'd expect to find huge forests even that is not big enough to give you enough wood to build a sacrifice enough that would satisfy God isn't that amazing all the animals you can think of and all the wood you can think of will not build a sacrifice big enough for God's majesty and greatness must have raised questions for the ancient people who heard this to think well what's our little old lamb and bull that we've been offering for a little while back you know in the old days what's that accomplished we know in the end what sacrifice is worthy of

God and it's not so much great in volume as character of course verses 15 and 16 have used figures of speech verse 17 puts it all very boldly all the nations are as nothing before him they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness it doesn't mean God's not concerned with them it's just that by comparison with the greatness of God the nations are nothing no challenge no rival to him God is incomparable in his greatness so then the rhetorical question again to whom then will you liken God or what likeness compares with him the answer of course is well there's nothing but now Isaiah floats up another possibility an idol consider that now these verses are very sarcastic and satirical they're destroying the argument for idolatry by ridicule in the end showing how pathetic it is you see if God is so transcendent so great so powerful then you cannot make an image of him or an idol of him doesn't approach

God and the description that follows in verses 19 and 20 just shows the ridiculousness of thinking that idols are great what's an idol then well a workman casts it that is if it's metal you cast the metal into a shape and a goldsmith overlays it with gold so it's usually made of bronze and covered in gold and he casts for it silver chains yes it's very expensive but it's just the work of a workman it's made of human hands but what's even more ludicrous is verse 20 now some of the words in the ancient Hebrew have touched tricky and the NIV and the NRSV is slightly different but basically it's saying that if somebody's a bit poor and they can't afford gold and silver well then their idols are made of wood and of course the irony here is that well of course they're going to choose wood that doesn't rot well isn't that stupid I mean what's God compared to a little bit of mulberry wood or some

other wood that's not going to rot I mean really it's no rival is it it's just a ridiculous picture of comparison it's absurd idols are nothing and then this skilled artisan who's taken the wood or cast it he sets up an image that so that it won't topple you know you've got some piece of china in your home you put it on the on the mantelpiece or something you're a bit worried that it might fall over well really I mean if you're worried about an idol falling over it's nothing is it

I mean what a stupid statement idols they're just immobile you're just worried about them falling like Dagon's temple in 1 Samuel does that compare with God he's incomparably great those idols are nothing you see this is not a statement of saying yes there are other gods in other parts of the world this is saying there are no other gods but one and so often the Christian church in modern times has been soft on that issue oh yes we worship the same god as the Muslims and the same god as the Jews and yes yes yes of course it's all the same god it's not they're idols they're nothing at all nothing at all more rhetorical questions then in verse 21 haven't you known sense of anger and indignation I think here from Isaiah you should know the incomparability of God you don't need me to tell you that you should know it from your scriptures and your past experience but okay I'll tell you haven't you known haven't you heard well no they haven't heard because their ears have been deaf we've seen that already has it not been told of you from the beginning by your parents but also maybe from the beginning of the world telling you the story of creation you should know all this have you not understood from the foundations of the earth that God's the creator in effect this is saying aren't you blind aren't you stupid why don't you know this why don't you trust this

God why are you capitulating to idols and despair yes it's saying that the creation tells of the glory and might of God what Psalm 19 tells us to be true what Romans 1 tells us to be true as well yes you see God sits above the circle of the earth sort of the sky and horizon I think that's talking about picturing the sort of firmament as a beaten dish over the world God's above it he's not part of the creation that puts an end to most of the eastern religions of our own day doesn't it who think that you go and meet God when you hug a tree in the bush or something stupid God's far greater than that he's not part of the creation he's over and above and beyond it and when he's so far above it then its inhabitants are just like grasshoppers that is they're small he can hardly see them just like in the Tower of Babel God had to come down to see the tower they're building you see what we think is to be so permanent and great and glorious is for the greatness of God just a trifling nothing much at all this picture is even of greater than the first vision where God see as I see God lifted up in the temple this is God lifted up above the creation he stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to live in we think the creation is something massive but for God it's just like closing the curtains in the lounge room at night or pitching up a little tent indeed the idea of material here is actually fairly flimsy material he brings princes to naught and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing

[52 : 55] Thomas Hardy the novelist who died early this century said that God was like a giant watchmaker wound up the world and then sat back and watched it's not the biblical view at all is it a God who brings princes to naught a God who intervenes but he's not part of the creation he works in it and through it and brings it to his purposes and fulfillment but he's not part of it you don't find God in a sense in the creation with the exception of course of Christian people in whom is God's spirit but the people aren't God God's spirit abides in them now even for these princes and rulers scarcely are they planted verse 24 says scarcely so and scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth when he blows upon them and they wither and the tempest carries them off like stubble yes that's what God said in verses 6 to 8 about people generally and he says it here about the greatest of people the most powerful of people even them little breath and they're gone doesn't say much for human power does it

God is without rival God is incomparable there is nothing that comes anywhere close to matching him or rivaling him creation sacrifices idols people nations kings nothing nothing that's going to challenge God and now comes another challenge to whom then will you compare me God is now speaking himself not even Isaiah speaking what's left to compare to God who's my equal none says the holy one the idea of holiness of course is of the idea of separateness or otherness again demonstrating his incomparability but now one final comparison to be made lift up your eyes on high and see who created these the stars the moon the sun it doesn't matter what we're looking whether it's day or night who created these the answer is the same the one who brings out their host and numbers them probably the stars here and it's as though the army host is an idea of an army as though God is the commander of the stars and he marches them out by night and marches

them home and dawn he calls them all by name yes there are hundreds of them you can't count them but God knows them all by name and because he's great in strength mighty in power not one is missing now that that verse is a transitional in a sense because so far we've been saying that God is absolutely incomparable in his greatness and that's versus saying the same the stars the sun the moon that the Babylonians worship they're nothing they're not God's either God made them but it says that God is so great that he knows them each by name he counts them not one is missing and that of course is leading into the following verses that say God is so great but that doesn't mean that he's forgotten you that you're so small that he's ignored you or forgotten you God so great that not one will be missing so therefore you his people be assured that even though he's so great he's with you he'll find you he'll rescue you he'll bring you home that's the transition now from that verse because verse 27 is the complaint now of the people in exile why do you say oh Jacob and speak oh Israel same people different names are being used my way is hidden from the Lord and my right is disregarded by my God as though God's neglecting you or abandoned you or because you're so small you can't see him why are you complaining that you've been abandoned and forsaken by God here in exile but notice what the verses say about the people in exile you are Israel you are Jacob yes they're in exile in Babylon but they're still Israel and Jacob the words of the covenant the words of God's promise words of reassurance and comfort don't think you're abandoned by God the promises he made to Jacob and passed on to the nation of Israel they still stand stop complaining is in effect what's being said in this verse in one sense it's almost a sense of indignation again how dare you complain about God how dare you grumble that God's forgotten you is that you or somebody you know somebody who at the slightest misfortune starts grumbling that God's let them down how dare you Isaiah would say God never lets us down it may seem that he's left us and abandoned us but his promises stand how dare you grumble and complain about God do you not know have you not heard again questions of anger and indignation God's the everlasting God the creator of the ends of the earth he doesn't and that of course sums up the argument thus far as well he doesn't faint or grow weary it's not as though God got tired in 587 and sort of sat down for a sleep and that's why Jerusalem was overrun he does not faint or grow weary his understanding is unsearchable yeah we don't understand exactly what's going on here although a lot of it we do but it doesn't mean he's not there doesn't mean he doesn't care you see the argument to this point could open up to a couple of conclusions if God is so great well it seems that he's now grown tired and weary and he can't save but now as I said that's not true it may be that if God is so great we can't understand his wisdom and that's and that's true and what that means is don't jump to rash conclusions about what God is or isn't doing because if his ways are beyond us he's told us all we need to know but don't jump to conclusions about what you don't know and that of course is what we're prone to do isn't it we make rash assumptions about God and always they're too small always they're confined by our own thinking and imagination but but God's bigger than that as Paul says of course in the prayer to the Ephesians God's far beyond our imagination so don't jump to rash conclusions don't think your wisdom and understanding is the sum total of it all God is bigger indeed God not only doesn't faint or grow weary but he is the source of strength he gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless this is an acknowledgement of our need for his strength even youths grow tired in a sense there is of the person in prime of life full fitness and full strength but even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall you see again the sense of incomparability even the strongest people don't match the strength of God but those who hope in the Lord or rather in the NRSV those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength they shall mount up with wings like eagles run and not be weary walk and not faint who are the strong those who wait for the Lord that's the condition that's placed upon receiving the strength of God here it's not God giving strength to those who've got some but God giving strength to those who have none those who wait those who exercise dependence on God those who exercise helplessness I know that one of the times that I get the most angry when my character is revealed in all its worst is in a traffic jam in peak hour traffic and that I've worked out is because I am absolutely helpless I can't do a thing I can't get to where I'm going faster by any other means and I hate being helpless now I don't think I'm unique in that because I see people who are facing going to nursing homes or hostels who are hating losing their independence if that's how we treat

[61 : 38] God we're in trouble because with God we have to come to him as helpless dependent and therefore patient because in a traffic jam when I'm helpless that's when I lose all my patience what little I have to start with and I get very impatient as some friends might tell you if over you meet

them you see waiting is not is not resignation here those who wait for the Lord have not just given up and think oh well those who wait have confident expectation they know his coming and they look forward to it eagerly confidently and patiently that's what hope is that's what waiting for the Lord is they're the same the NIV uses hope the NRSV uses wait the same ideas you see waiting is expectation hope is expectation it's persevering in fact it's being dogged in perseverance come hell or high water we will wait for and hope for the Lord to come to our rescue and notice also this great promise that the strength to persevere comes from God himself it's not our own strength but his and the chapter finishes with yet another picture of God carrying God the shepherd in verse 11 carrying the lambs but now in a sense it's a it's a tricky verse but in a sense God is the eagle lifting us up on his wings is one way of understanding this verse it's not our own strength or even our own wings it is God's ability in a sense to to fly us or carry us back to be with himself now all of that I think tells us one thing I skipped over way back at the beginning the voice in the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord how do you prepare the way for the Lord by waiting in hope and trusting in him there is role in despair and exile that meant turning away from despair turning away from idols turning away from despondency and turning to God with waiting confident expectation and hope and the same for us and we'll see more of that in the chapters that follow in the rest of this book well let me conclude in 538 BC 50 or so years after the destruction of

Jerusalem the Babylonians were destroyed themselves by the Persians Cyrus was the Persian leader and one of his first edicts the year after he conquered Babylon in 538 was this that all conquered peoples of the Babylonians could go back to their homelands Cyrus was benevolent their policy was not to gather the leaders in Babylon where you can keep strict reign over them and therefore be sure that there's nobody going to lead a coup in the far-flung parts of the empire his policy was let them all go home keep them happy and they'll be willing subjects and so he issued a decree you can read it at the end of two chronicles of the beginning of the book of Ezra and the Jews were allowed to go back to Jerusalem but when they went these words weren't fulfilled they got back there but was still despair still despondency just a province no king no glory no temple rebuilt for another 20 years nearly but in 30 AD thereabouts a man appeared proclaiming the words of verse 3 of this chapter prepare the way of the Lord and for those who heard they must have known these key words from Isaiah 40 what was he saying in Matthew 3 or Mark 1 he's saying that only now is the exile coming to an end in 30 AD only now is God coming to carry you home to be with him those words of Isaiah were not fulfilled so much in 538 but now in 30 AD and then as you read through the Gospels all four of them you discover how God has come in human form God incarnate the good shepherd to carry his people the one who invites the weary to find rest for their souls in him the one who reveals the glory of God to the world God himself come all the way as a as a human being for sinners but more than even his birth and coming as a man these words point to his death for there in his death is the greatest power ever unleashed greater than the power of creation is the power of the cross to save there in the cross is the greatest wisdom ever seen and there in the cross is the greatest glory of God ever seen not where you'd expect it surely because we go out and see a sunset we think oh there's God's glory we see a cross and forget that there's greater glory there for there's greater grace there for the whole world there is the penalty paid sins cancelled out and there is the carrying God carrying on the cross our sins away from us and coming back one day to carry us home to the new Jerusalem salvation is entirely the work of God he comes all the way to us and picks us up to carry us home no wonder the black Africans sang swing low sweet chariot coming for to carry me home