

New Heavens and Earth

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on May 16, 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled New Heavens and Earth and is from Isaiah 65, verses 1-25. Several years ago, when I was working in insurance work, I was sent by my company to a management and leadership training conference.

And whilst on that conference, we were given various exercises, but one in particular stayed in my mind. We were paired off, and each of the two in each pair was given a set of criteria which they had to meet in the negotiated deal with the other person in the pair.

Now, I can't quite remember those sorts of details, but one of us was trying to buy or sell something, and these were my criteria, these were the person's criteria. They didn't meet, of course, and we had to negotiate.

I was determined to get my way entirely. Why do you laugh? And I did.

[1 : 23] I was intractable and intransigent, and I would only deal on my terms, and I would not compromise one iota with anything this other person would propose.

When this other person proposed something I didn't like, I might stay silent, or I might just shake my head, or stare stonily at them.

And this person got more and more frustrated, and more and more angry. In a similar sort of way, the ancient Israel of these chapters of Isaiah was angry with God.

God, it seemed to them, was playing hard to get. God, it seemed to them, was not interested in their terms and their pleas.

God, it seemed to them, was silent and remote and not interested in them or negotiating with them.

[2 : 33] He wasn't answering the phone. He wasn't returning the messages that ancient Israel kept sending him. They called to God for help in their anguish, and there was no answer.

Silence. That's what chapter 64 is about. Chapter begins, pleading with God, oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down.

And it finishes with the statement, will you keep silent? God's not answering. There are many calls. Why doesn't God return their messages?

Why doesn't God sit down at the negotiating table with them? His response comes in chapter 65, which was read for us just now.

And God's initial response is two things. Firstly, he says, he was ready to hear them. He said, I'm there.

[3 : 40] I'm ready to respond. That's what verse 1 and the beginning of verse 2 is about. I was ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me.

I said, here I am, here I am, to a nation that did not call on my name. I held out my hands all day long, pleading in a sense with them to contact him.

He's saying, I'm not remote. I'm not playing hard to get. I've been by the so-called spiritual phone waiting for you to ring for days and days and days.

I've been begging for you to call. Now what's going on here? Israel in the previous chapter has been saying, we've been calling and calling and calling and no messages are returned and God's saying, I've been waiting for you to call and nothing's happened.

The reason is in the second point of God's response. Your lifestyle has cut the line. When you pick up the phone and dial my number, so to speak, it's not because I'm silent or ignoring the phone that you don't hear me.

[4 : 52] It's because you've cut the line. You can't get through because of the way you live your life. You ring and say, I don't answer. The problem is you're not actually calling me.

Your lifestyle's cut you off from me. And so now when you actually do plea with me, there's no line to travel down. Look at the things that Israel does that have cut off their line to God.

They come in verses 2 to 7. Firstly, they're called a rebellious people. That is, they walk in a way that's not good following their own devices, their own plans.

These are autonomous acting people who are ignoring God's ways and seeking to live their own. They're making their own decisions.

As one of the old prayers of confession in the prayer book say, we have followed the devices and desires of our own hearts. That's Israel, ancient Israel, to a T.

[5 : 54] They are the ones that are intractable and intransigent, seeking persistently and stubbornly their own plans and devices. The effect of their life is that they provoke God to my face, he says continually in verse 3.

They're offensive to Him. They're provoking Him. They sacrifice in gardens and offer incense on bricks.

They're very religious people. But the religion's all false. It's wrong. It's corrupt. It's pagan. It's superstitious.

As though there is some magical place in which you are to offer a sacrifice. It's fundamentally opposed to Old Testament law, which say where you should offer sacrifices and gardens does not fit the bill.

Their religiosity is abominable before God. And he goes on in verse 4 to say, you sit inside tombs and spend the night in secret places. They're sitting in tombs because they're trying to make contact with the dead, which is again something expressly forbidden earlier in the Old Testament.

[7 : 09] They eat swine's flesh. Can you imagine Jews doing that? The flesh of pigs?

The most unclean of animals for them. And they eat it with broth of abominable things in their vessels. They are full of unclean practices.

They are full of all the things that the Old Testament says very clearly cut you off from God, that snip the line, so to speak, between you and God.

Their religion is false. It's pagan and superstitious. It's full of the occult and trying to contact the dead.

And what happens when the human heart is perverted by paganism is that it no longer is able to discern good and evil.

[8 : 06] It is no longer able to discern what is holy and what is clean. And the relationship between the two becomes inverted. That's what verse 5 is saying.

The people think that they are holy because of all their things. And so they say to other people, keep to yourself, don't come near me, for I'm too holy for you.

What mocking irony, really. Because these are people in effect covered with spiritual excrement.

And they somehow think that other people are going to taint them and make them bad.

The truth is ironic. They are filthy. And nothing else could make them filthier. Israel is living its life in its own terms.

And when it contacts God, it is trying to do so on its own terms. And God is silent. And I've met many people like that.

[9 : 17] Dozens and dozens of people like ancient Israel. People who complain when God is silent. Who complain when it seems that He's remote and He's not answering their desperate pleas for help.

They're wanting God on their terms, not His. And they complain when He's seen silent. You see, I've met people who sleep together. And then when something goes wrong in their life, they might pray to God or plead with God for some help.

And why isn't He answering me? And the reason? Because their lifestyle is immoral. They've cut the line. They're seeking to live on their own terms and have God on their own terms, not His.

I've met people who are superstitious. Full of stupid ideas about what will bring them luck and what will be bad luck. And something goes wrong, their luck runs out, so they plead with God in some prayer.

And they complain that God isn't there to answer him or her. I've met many people who are rich and selfish, greedy people. Who are accumulating all the wealth they can in the world.

[10 : 30] And then suddenly find something beyond their control. Their child dies or is ill. So they pray to God. And He doesn't answer.

And they complain that He's silent, that He's remote, that He's absent. What sort of God can that be? But what's gone wrong? Their lifestyle has snipped the line.

It's their fault, not God's. People who ignore God all their life and then expect Him to be at their beck and call when something goes wrong in their life and then complain when He doesn't answer.

That's the height of affrontery and rudeness. And there are dozens of people in our world that are just like that and sometimes people in the church as well.

The prayers of a righteous person are powerful and effective in God's sight. But the prayers of someone who is not righteous, the prayers of someone who continues in the depths of sin and living life on their own terms, their prayers are not effective.

[11 : 42] And if they're answered, it is entirely due to God's extraordinary mercy and not their just desserts.

But now God does speak. No longer is He silent. But rather than words of relief and comfort, these words bring, ouch, they hurt.

These practices and these people who do these practices, God says midway through verse 5, are a smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all day long.

Have you ever walked around a campfire and got some of the smoke up your nostrils? Makes tears come to your eyes, doesn't it? Get a powerful whiff down your throat and you cough and you splutter. It's not very pleasant.

That's what God is saying about ancient Israel in its immorality and idolatry. It brings tears to His eyes. It is unpleasant.

[12 : 44] It causes Him anger. See, He says, it is written before me. I will not keep silent, but I will repay.

I will indeed repay into their laps their iniquities and their ancestors' iniquities together, says the Lord, because they offered incense on the mountains and reviled me on the hills. I will measure into their laps full payment for their actions.

This is solemn and serious judgment. It is unchangeably mutable judgment. It is written. It's clear. God is not acting capriciously here when He is angry at their sin.

It's very clear that God will respond with anger to His sin. It is the right response. It is a measured response. It is His correct response to such sinfulness.

I remember when I was a child with two younger sisters getting punished when we fought. Didn't matter whose fault it was, I got punished.

[13 : 56] But I should also say that there were times when it didn't matter whose fault it was, my sisters got punished. In fact, more often than not, whenever we fought, we all got punished, we all got sent to our rooms. It didn't matter who was innocent or guilty.

Now, I always being, of course, the innocent party, with two younger sisters, you can understand that, always felt hard done by. Innocent and guilty alike being punished.

School teachers are a bit like that sometimes, aren't they? Some people in class are bad, nobody owns up to it, so the whole class has a detention or suffers, innocent and guilty alike.

God makes it clear that His justice is not so indiscriminate. The guilty will be punished, the innocent will not.

He compares ancient Israel to a bunch of grapes in verse 8. Some are bad, many are good.

Probably ancient Israel was the other way around. Many are bad and some are good. The question is, will the whole bunch be destroyed?

[15 : 02] Not at all. God will preserve the good, destroy the bad. And that's what verses 8 to 10 are about. God always spares the innocent.

It's the same point made in Genesis 18 when Abraham pleads for Sodom. It's destroyed in the end, not with the righteous inside it, because they're all guilty.

God would not have destroyed it if there were innocent ones within it. So for the sake of God's faithful servants, the end of verse 9 says, and for the end of verse 8 says, God will not destroy all.

He'll preserve his servants, his faithful ones. Indeed for them, he'll bring forth descendants from Jacob and from Judah, inheritors of my mountains. Jacob and Judah are in a sense variant terms for the people of God.

My chosen shall inherit the land and my servants shall settle there. What God is saying there is that he will be faithful to the promises that he's made at the beginning of the Bible, two of which are mentioned here.

[16:13] To Abraham was promised both descendants and land. Here they are combined. Descendants and land. God is faithful.

He keeps his promises to his faithful people, even despite the sin of the nation as a whole. In fact, verse 10 tells us that the land will be particularly good.

Sharon is not just the name of some girl on a soap opera. Sharon is a pasture that is fertile in the west of Israel. The valley of Achor in the east of Israel is fairly dry and barren.

But here it will be fertile too. I think what it's saying is that from west to east across the whole sweep of the land, it will be a good and fertile land that they will inherit.

And who will receive it? The end of verse 10 makes it clear for my people who have sought me. Not those who think they've sought him and rung up on a dead line. But those faithful, obedient servants of God, those righteous ones who seek the Lord, theirs will be this land.

[17:26] The contrast between those who are faithful and those who are not becomes even clearer in the verses that follow. But you, verse 11 says, in contrast to the faithful ones who will inherit the land, but you who forsake the Lord and forget my holy mountain, not a forgetfulness that's amnesia or Alzheimer's disease, the forgetfulness of rebellion and disobedience.

For those, they're the ones who set a table for fortune, with a capital F, and fill cups of mixed wine for destiny, with a capital D. Names of gods or pretend gods.

People who are having some sort of pagan sacrificial meal. People who are trying to control their fortune, their destiny, their future. There are people like that in every age, of course.

They may not sit down to an explicitly sacrificial pagan meal, but there are people for whom are trying to tap into destiny and fortune in all sorts of bizarre ways, seeking to control their lives and control the future of their lives as well.

People living on their own terms is in effect what this is describing. So for those people, but you, verse 11 says, I, God, the God of the Bible, the living God, I, and I alone, will destine you.

[18:56] It's mocking. It's sarcastic. They think they've tapped into the gods of fortune and destiny. But it is God who has their destiny in their hands and the destiny for them will be the sword and slaughter.

Yes, all of you shall bow down, but not to your gods. You'll bow down to your slaughter. God's righteous judgment on such idolaters. They complain that God doesn't answer their calls.

The opposite is the truth. When I called, God says, you did not answer. When I spoke, you did not listen. The standard sin of the people throughout the book of Isaiah, as we've seen several weeks over recent months.

But you did what was evil in my sight. You chose what I did not delight in. Their sin is not just an accidental slip. It is deliberate and persistent.

What God delights in, they hate. They choose what he does not delight in. And today's people who ignore God are just as guilty.

[20:14] So the great divide then is spelled out even more sharply in the verses that follow. 13 to 15. Therefore, thus says the Lord God, my servants shall eat, but you shall go hungry.

My servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty. My servants shall rejoice, but you shall be put to shame.

My servants shall sing for gladness of heart, but you shall cry out for pain of heart and shall wail for anguish of spirit. You shall leave your name to my chosen to use as a curse, and the Lord God will put you to death.

But to his servants, he will give a different name. on the one hand, the curses, hunger, thirst, shame, pain, no name, and death.

And on the other hand, the blessings, food, drink, joy, singing, and God's new name. Again, God is keeping his promises.

[21:35] Again, we find here the echoes of his promises to Abraham. He promised the descendants of Abraham who'd be faithful, a name that would be blessed. And here that echo is found again.

But he also said that those who curse you, I'll curse. And echoes of that are found here too. Jew. This is not a racial divide.

This is not an ethnic divide between Jew and Gentile. It is a moral divide. It is the divide of the sheep and goats in Jesus' parable. It is a divide that is real.

Last night I was at a dinner party. I met a lady who claimed to be Anglican, though I suspect it's a long time before her shadow crossed the door of an Anglican church. We all end up in the same place, don't we? She said to me at about midnight as I was trying to get home. No way. I'm sorry to say it's not true.

[22 : 41] We don't all end up in the same place. The divide is real and it is a moral divide. Not all religions lead to God.

Not all lives lead to God. It doesn't matter what you call yourself. It's how you live that shows its truth. And verse 16 tells us that whether God judges sinners or whether he blesses his faithful ones, he is being faithful.

He's keeping his promises. Whoever invokes a blessing in the land shall bless by the God of faithfulness, literally the God of amen. men. And whoever takes an oath in the land shall swear by the God of faithfulness, the God of our men, because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my sight.

These are people who know God. These are the people who are blessed. Their oaths will be effective because God is faithful and keeps his promises. sinners.

There's nothing new here really. Early in the Old Testament it's very clear that those who disobey God will face various curses, including the things that are mentioned in these verses.

[23 : 59] But for those who obey, abundant blessings are theirs, also as described in these verses. Now it could be that we object to this. We think, well I'm a faithful servant of God, but there are times when I go hungry or I know lots of Christians who hunger in the world or who are thirsty.

Their lives are not characterized by gladness and singing. They're full of sadness and grief and sorrow and pain. It doesn't seem in this world that God is keeping these promises after all.

I don't think I believe this to be true. Look around the world to Christians in Rwanda, they're not described by these verses at all, they're on the opposite side. What is God saying here?

To what does this refer? The verses that finish this chapter explain all of that. Not only that, they give us the incentive for right living.

Why shun idols? Why shun paganism and superstition? Why get rid of your own devices? Why take up God's plans and God's devices?

[25 : 07] Why seek the Lord? Why listen to Him? Why trust Him? Why? Because He's creating a new universe for those who do those things.

And this universe is so good that it is worth putting aside all idolatry, all unbelief, all immorality for the sake of that new universe.

See what He says in verse 17? For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth. The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Your trials and tribulations on this earth, they'll be forgotten in the glory of this new universe.

And this is a place for God's servants. A righteous place for righteous people. And that's where these promises are fulfilled. Not right now. Yes, Christians do hunger.

Yes, Christians do thirst. Yes, Christians do suffer pain, defeat, death and sadness in this world. But these promises stand yet in the future for us as they did for Isaiah all those centuries ago.

[26 : 12] This glorious new universe, this new heavens and new earth is characterized by extraordinary things. See what they are. There's joy, firstly, in verses 18 and 19.

Joy and delight and gladness. Everything that makes for sadness, it will be absent. It will be perpetual joy and gladness. Moreover, in verse 20, there will be long life.

No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days or an old person who doesn't live out a lifetime. For one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered a curse.

That may not look such a good promise when you see people approaching a hundred years old. Grandparents who are frail and in bad health. Why keep living like that forever?

But you see, this is not talking about long life that is full of misery and Alzheimer's. This is talking about long life that is full of health and strength and joy and gladness.

[27 : 15] This is talking about long life as in the prime of youth for decade upon decade upon decade. This is long life that the Garden of Eden was initially about.

Remember all those long lived people in the early chapters of Genesis? This is where this is pushing. Back to the beginning. But moreover it will be a place free of futility and frustration in verses 21 and 22.

If you build a house you'll live in it. If you plant a vineyard you'll enjoy its fruit. You won't build something and then find you can't enjoy its fruit. Think of work where you spend months and months on a project and just at the end of the project your manager says to you, sorry the project's scrapped.

What a waste of time. Think of all the things you do in your life which come to nothing. You go and do some work around the house and then find that tree falls on it and smashes up your work or you do a nice project for school and on the way to school it gets blown away in the wind or someone comes and tears it up or something.

What a waste of time. No futility or frustration in heaven. It will be perfect. But that's not all either. There'll be blessing for future generations in verse 23.

[28 : 38] The blessing will continue to the children and then to the children's children and beyond that as well. It's not just temporary you see. But more than that in verse 24 prayers will be so effective that they'll be answered before you pray.

Before they call I'll answer while they're yet speaking I'll hear. What a contrast to those sinners who think they're praying to God and get no answer. These are righteous people and so powerful and effective will be their prayers that they're answered before they're uttered.

But there's more still. There's harmony in verse 25. Wolf and lamb together. You don't see that very often unless it's Disneyland. A lion and straw.

A lion eating straw like an ox. You see this is a picture not just of animal harmony. It's symbolic of harmony of all things that are divided. No longer will one devour another.

This is harmony of all the creation at last. How can it be? How can this picture be? It's so good it doesn't seem to be believable or possible.

[29 : 43] The last two lines give us the clue. The serpent. Its food shall be dust. They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

The serpent. That slippery character from the beginning of the Bible.

The one who led into sin. And the one who was going to keep on seeking to devour the offspring of the woman. Now it will come to an end.

Now the serpent will no longer be a threat. Because sin's gone. That's the problem. The root cause will be taken out.

And all the consequences that flow will be extraordinary. You see all the things that are the opposites of the features here are consequences of sin.

[30 : 46] You see it's sin which produces sorrow but this will be gladness. It's sin that produces death but this will be long life. It's sin that produces futility but there won't be futility in this new heaven and new earth.

It's sin that produces curse but here there will only be blessing. It's sin that produces unanswered prayer and here prayer will be answered before it's uttered. And it's sin that produces disharmony and that will all be gone in perfect harmony in this place.

The root cause is gone you see. The serpent's no longer a threat. This is a place that is eternally perfect. Consigned to the dust is the serpent of sin.

Is this too good to be true? No is the great answer. Is it believable? Yes is the great answer.

Is it possible? Yes again is the great answer. It's possible because of the servant of God who died to make many righteous.

[31 : 48] The linchpin of Isaiah is that servant who died in chapter 53 taking away the sins of people. It is he and he alone that makes this possible.

This is not just a wishful thinking. It's not just an ideal plan of utopia. It's not just pie in the sky. It is believable and possible and real because of the servant who makes it so.

This glorious vista of heaven is our destiny if we are people who seek to live on God's terms.