

The Only God without Equal

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Date: 31 December 2017

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[0 : 00] Maybe you are sad to see the end of 2017. Maybe there were some landmark happy times for you. Maybe a birth in your family.

Perhaps a clean bill of health. No real hiccups in your relationships, maybe. Maybe work and finances were all in all pretty solid.

Maybe you were like my brother-in-law at the beginning of 2017, said to the whole family, Hey, there's this thing called Bitcoin. Maybe you should invest. But now owns an island. Or maybe you're like my annoying friend, Matt, who barracks for Richmond.

And today is the official last day you're allowed to crow about that one. Tomorrow is a new season. And all in all, all in all, you're sad to see the end of 2017.

Another one like that, please, Lord. Or maybe you are glad to see the end of this year. Did you have a death in your family?

[1 : 05] Did a diagnosis or a miscarriage devastate you this year? Was your singleness or loneliness particularly painful for you in 2017?

Did the big changes to Australian law rock your faith as a Christian? Or maybe work and money or future plans meant you spent the whole year at some awful crossroad in life.

And now you're happy to see the back of this year. Not another one like that, please, Lord. And this is really important because even as Christians, even if Jesus has ultimately saved us from sin, your crises of 2017 and of wider society, they show that we still need saving from this world.

So it was in Isaiah's time, which is around 740 BC. You see, every time Israel experienced some sort of blessing, it lasted only a short time.

Their sin, their idolatry always got in the way. And that meant disaster was always looming on the horizon. And in chapters 1 to 39 of Isaiah, which is well before our reading today, Isaiah recounts two times in Israel's history where they were steeped in idolatry.

[2 : 31] So the first was chapters 7 to 9. And because of their idolatry, God sends Syria in judgment. Israel repents.

They turn back to God. God forgives them. He saves them. And they experience some blessings for a little while. You get to chapter 36 to 39, which is just before our passage today.

And Israel go back to their idols again. And so God judges them. This time he sends the nation of Assyria instead. The Assyrian attack goes right through the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel and wipes them out forever in 722 BC.

And the attack goes as far as the very walls of Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah. So Israel repent. They turn to God. God saves them miraculously.

And almost immediately, they go back to their sin. They go back to their idols. And so chapter 39 ends where Isaiah points to this tiny tin pot town of Babylon and says, that town of Babylon will one day rise up and overthrow you.

[3 : 43] And 70 years later, it happens. Babylon forms an empire. Completely wipes out the Assyrians. Completely wipes out Israel. They kill all of the Israelites. And those who are left are carried off into exile.

That's where we get the book of Daniel from. And in the whole Old Testament of the Bible, it is the lowest point of Israel's history, the Babylonian exile. And Isaiah's point through the first 39 chapters is this.

Because there is no permanent solution to sin, the world is trapped in an endless cycle of sin and then judgment. And sin and then judgment.

And that means there's always another disaster on the horizon. You see, Israel cannot enjoy the blessings of God because sooner or later, their sin and then God's judgment spoil the day.

Israel were also heading towards a new year. But instead of optimism, all they could do was cry out, save me from this world.

[4 : 50] And in lots of ways, we are very similar to them. You see, we too cannot enjoy any blessings that are coming our way in 2018 because sooner or later, sin and its consequences spoil the day.

Even as Christians, even though ultimately we're saved from sin and personal judgment, we're still stuck in this world. We're still feeling the effects of sin and judgment.

Whether it's our own sin, whether it's the sin of other people on us, or whether it's the global effects of sin in this broken world that leads to everything from natural disasters to heartache, from cancer and especially death.

Save me from this world. And importantly, in situations where you need salvation, that is when it's really tempting to hunt around for a better solution.

When it's tempting to get rid of the dusty old Christianity that you grew up with. Do I want to put all my eggs in the Jesus basket?

[6 : 05] When I get that diagnosis from the doctor? When life or the job is horrible? When your family breaks your heart?

When relationships are a real struggle? When, when, when? When, when, when, when? When. But Isaiah says to a people who are facing a disastrous new year, he says a massive rescue operation is underway.

And that God is the only one who can do it. This is a chapter where his words are prepared prophetically about a hundred years in advance. and he says to a people who are about to experience their lowest ever point, he says, comfort, comfort.

Verse 1, comfort, comfort my people. And so my aim with you today is like Isaiah's with Israel, that you would be comforted amidst the disasters of 2018 because God is coming to rescue you.

I'll say that again. My aim is that you would be comforted amidst the disasters of your future because God is coming to rescue you. And so there's a handout which you should all have and there are some points on it which tells you where I'm going today.

[7 : 26] And if you could please, as Graham said, please keep this passage open. That would really help me. We're at point number one. And so Isaiah 40 becomes a massive turning point, not just in Isaiah, the book of Isaiah, but the whole Bible in fact, because for a world trapped in the endless cycle of sin and judgment, Isaiah prophesies comfort.

He says, comfort, comfort my people. God is going to get you out of the mess. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

The tone is very soft. It's very gentle. It is the opposite of the first 39 chapters of heavy judgment on Israel. Your exile will one day be over, says Isaiah.

Be comforted. God himself is coming to rescue you. And Isaiah backs up God's claim of rescue with three voices.

[8 : 42] I've put voice one, two and three on your handout. So three voices. Verse three. A voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.

Verse number six. A voice says, cry out. And halfway through verse nine. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout.

And the first voice says that God himself is coming. God is going to rescue you in person. Verse three. A voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up. Every mountain made low. The rough ground shall become level. The rugged places are plain.

I don't know if you remember when the Eastern Freeway used to finish at Doncaster Road. Do you remember that? If you've been living in these suburbs for long enough. Well, it used to finish at Doncaster Road and instead of a freeway, they used to have a creek which ran, I don't know, all the way forever.

[9 : 49] And when I was about 13 and 14, my cousin and I, we would hunt for yabbies in the creek just around Blackburn Road. Because that's what you do when you're 13 and 14. But remember when they extended the freeway from Doncaster Road to Springvale Road just for a period of time?

And what they did is they basically built right through my creek. Life's tough as a teenager. Have you ever been to Switzerland?

In Switzerland, when they're building a road, when they get to a mountain, the magnificent Swiss, they just drill right through the mountain. It's absolutely fantastic if you ever get to see it.

Well, Isaiah says that when God builds a highway, he just takes all the valleys and fills them in. He takes all the mountains and makes them low. He takes the rugged places, the rough places, and he makes them like a beautiful plain of grass like in Africa.

And God is not building a highway to connect the ring road to the Eastern Freeway as the government's going to do next year. God is building a super highway for himself.

[10:58] You need a rescue from this world. God himself is coming. And rather than rolling out the red carpet, he thought he would prepare the world for his visit by changing the topography of the land.

Verse 5. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed. And all people will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Now, New Testament reading, which Tom gave us, that was from Mark's gospel. And Mark uses these exact verses from verse 3 and 4 at the beginning of his gospel as Jesus arrives. And it's as though Mark has got Isaiah open in front as he's writing his gospel and he's just ticking off this prophecy from Isaiah as Jesus walks right by him.

You see, the claims from Isaiah that God is going to rescue you from sin, that he's going to rescue you for a new creation from this world, are so outrageous.

They're so audacious. They're so unbelievable that no one will accept it. And I think that Mark, therefore, at Jesus' arrival is saying, hey, listen, 2,000 years ago, the rescue has already begun.

[12:13] When Jesus walked on by, God himself came, just as this Isaiah passage says he would. And that means that as Christians, we can be even more certain than the people of Isaiah's time that God will rescue.

We have met Jesus face to face in Mark's gospel. We've experienced his salvation personally in our lives. We have more reason than Israel to be comforted as we await the final act of salvation.

And the second voice says you can trust God's word because, verse 8, it endures forever. So God himself is coming, first voice. Second voice, you can trust his word.

Verse 6, a voice says, cry out. And I said, what shall I cry? All people are like grass and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them. You see, what if you put your hope for 2018 in flowers and grass?

[13:26] Recently, I've become a veggie gardener. I don't know if I'm proud or sorry to say that. And the truth is, I start work here tomorrow officially. But the truth is, I care about little else in life other than my veggie plot.

And most nights you can find me at 10 o'clock with a torch protecting my lettuce from the little beasties. So if you know any cure for snails, do tell me.

But imagine if my hope for 2018 was in my veggie plot being unscathed. Or imagine if your hope for 2018 was in your lawn staying green through an Aussie summer.

You see, one by one, the things and the people that Israel trusted in showed themselves to be as reliable as my veggie plot and as your lawn staying green in January.

Isaiah says the only thing to trust in is God's word. And why? Because all people are just like grass. Their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field.

[14:32] The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the Lord blows on them. But verse 8, the grass withers and the flowers fall. But the word of God endures forever.

God is coming to rescue you. He will come in person. He will level the mountains if he has to. He has promised to do it and his word stands forever.

Be comforted. And the third voice is like the first. God is coming personally to rescue you from verse 9. You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain.

So there were no PA systems back then. If you wanted to be heard, you had to stand up on a mountain and scream or get a microphone. But for them, you who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout.

Lift it up. Do not be afraid. Say to the towns of Judah, here is your God. See, the sovereign Lord comes with power. He rules with a mighty arm. And the image of verse 10 is God's mighty arm.

[15:36] Now, he doesn't have a literal arm like we do. He's spirit, not flesh. But imagine if I were to bear my arm. Imagine if I was to bear my arm and say, yeah, come on, you want to take it outside?

Would that make you laugh? Probably. What if I was to say, hey, listen, you've got some problems, some crises in 2018. Don't worry. Me and my arms and my strength will save you.

Would that help you? But what about when God does it? What a comforting thought. Verse 11. He tends his flock like a shepherd. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart. He gently leads those that have young.

You're in crisis as a nation. As a country, you're trapped in an endless cycle of sin and judgment. But what if God would come tenderly? Gently is the language.

[16:37] Personally. What if he were to gather you in his arms like little lambs for a cosmic bear hug? Would that comfort you amidst your disasters?

Well, he's coming. And in verse 12, Isaiah takes a really interesting change of tack. Because rather than describe this rescue we've just been talking about, he goes on to talk about the God who is going to do the rescuing.

And that is our second point. As I said before, verse 12 onwards, these are magnificent. These are famous words.

But I wonder if you were to write the rest of the chapter, what words would you use to describe God? If I was to give you one word to describe God, what would it be?

Would it be love? Would it be holiness? Maybe power? Well, the one word Isaiah would choose is only.

[17:44] Only. Only. Only sounds restrictive. Exclusive. Limited. A bit arrogant. Maybe dangerous like some cult.

Yet this is a chapter that says God is the only. God's rescue is the only. There is none other. Later, Isaiah will invite us to compare God against everything else.

To see who's left standing. And we will see that God is the only. But this is an idea that's intolerable today. So you cannot say that our God is the only.

You cannot say that as far as kings go, Jesus is the only. We were singing that earlier. You cannot say that as far as paths to salvation are concerned, Christianity is the only.

I don't know if you know this, but for 500 years, this year, for 500 years, a member of the British royal family was given the title, the defender of the faith.

[18:49] The Christian faith. Prince Charles is currently the holder of that title. But a few years ago, Prince Charles changed it from the defender of the faith to the defender of the faiths, plural.

Do you see what's happened? Because surely there can't be one true faith. Surely there can't be one true path to salvation. See, in our culture, everything is a matter of perspective.

So in this room, we see everything through the lens of Jesus, and that's okay. Other people see everything through the lens of Muhammad, and that's okay. Other people see everything through the lens of liberal humanism, and that's okay.

But Isaiah 40, right through to chapter 55, says no, that is not okay. Because God is the only. He is the only God.

His salvation is the only one. You see, in a time of crisis, everyone offers you a rescue. And sometimes, some of the rescues on offer are as bad as the thing that got you in trouble in the first place.

[19:56] You ever get in trouble for telling a lie, and try to get your way out by telling another lie and another lie, and you realize you're deeper than you started? Every time Israel got in trouble, they were tempted to go back to their idols, which ironically got them in trouble and got them off in exile in the first place.

Isaiah says that is not okay. God is the only. And this is the main event for today. Verse 12. Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hands, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?

And so I have some props today. This is a baby syringe. All mums and dads will recognize it. You use it to give your little kids cough mixture and stuff. And so in the hollow of my hand, which is, I assume it's that thing there, I've been doing this all week.

So I can do, I can get four, I tried five mils, but I can only get to four. There's four. So in the hollow of Vijay's hand, he can measure four mils of water.

That's disgusting. Sorry. I'm sorry. There was nowhere else to put it. So in the hollow of my hand, I can put four mils of water. Did you know that in the oceans of the world, there are 1,000 trillion litres of water?

[21 : 18] Isn't that remarkable? 1,000 trillion litres of water. Verse 12 says that God measures these in the hollow of his hand. Verse 12 goes on.

Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance? So another prop. These are my wife's kitchen scales.

I'm going to put them on here. And this is a bag of rice, five kilos. This is enough to feed my small group Bible study for the rest of, a whole of 2018 or an Indian family for a week.

There you go. So I can get, I can't even get five kilos on these scales before it says, you know, E-double-R, which is an error.

So my scales top out around the five kilo mark. Did you know that Mount Everest weighs around about 3,000 billion tonnes?

[22 : 13] Incredible. God's scales just weighs it all out. And what Isaiah is doing, he's using regular household illustrations.

So the hollow of your hand, the span of your hand, scales and a balance to say God is unlike us. Don't compare him to us. He's unlike everything.

How big is your hand? Don't even bother. How good are your scales? Don't even waste your time. How big is Israel's ability to get them out of exile? How big is your ability to get you out of any crises that come in 2018?

To prevent them from happening in 2019? How big is the coalition's ability to solve the problems we all agree are in society?

Don't even bother comparing with God. He is the only. Verse 13. Who can fathom the spirit of the Lord or instruct the Lord as his counsellor?

[23 : 18] Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him? And who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? These verses have this repeated idea of instruction and counsel and consulting and knowledge.

They're sort of teachy, understanding type words. You see, God created the universe. But who taught him how to do it? Who did he consult for design help?

Who did he ask for planning permission? Who did he speak to when he was laying out the course of time? God is the only.

And Isaiah goes on and on and on like this. And I really wish we had an hour because these verses are absolute diamonds. Do go home and read them as part of your quiet times as you start the new year.

Isaiah chapter 40. But I think we're supposed to get to verse 18. And I think we're supposed to ask, With whom then will you compare God? With whom then will you compare God?

[24 : 22] Allah? Vishnu? Vishnu? The brilliance of humanity? And I don't think Isaiah is expecting an answer. But I think he plays along and says, Okay then, what about an idol?

Verse 19. As for an idol, A metal worker casts it and a goldsmith overlays it with gold and fashions silver chains for it. You see, when you're creating your own idol, you have to make it out of really impressive things.

So gold and silver is mentioned in verse 19. But this is where it gets really silly. Because for your idol, you have to make a strong base or it'll topple over.

So verse 20. A person too poor to present such an offering, that is of gold and silver, selects a wood that will not rot. The next best thing. They look for a skilled worker to set up an idol that will not topple.

It'd be very embarrassing if your idol fell over. And so part of your idol budget, apart from gold and silver, you have to find a skilled craftsman.

[25 : 25] You have to get him to build a really solid foundation of wood. Imagine in the middle of serving and worshipping your idol to get you out of a mess in 2018, and a gust of wind comes and blows the idol over.

Very embarrassing. And I love verse 21, because I think in verse 21, God himself is speaking to these idols. Have a look at verse 21.

I think he's testing their God powers. Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning?

If you're a God like me, you should be able to understand the plan of the universe. Don't you know? Have you not understood? Since the earth was founded, you accept these people's worship. Haven't you been let in on the plan? Weren't you there in the beginning like me? You see, God laughs at the ridiculousness of idols. Don't compare God with them, says Isaiah.

[26 : 27] Don't trust them to rescue you from this world. Only the creator can pull it off. Verse 22, he sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers.

And the imagery here is that God sits or has a permanent high view over the world, where he sees all places and all times, like a cosmic king high above the earth.

You can try and compare God to the rulers of the day. I think that's what verses 23 and 24 are doing. So he brings princes to naught. He reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.

No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, and he blows on them. And they wither. And a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

Just like the grass again. Obama. Trump. Maybe just eight years each. Rudd.

[27 : 31] Gillard. Rudd. Abbott. Turnbull. They'll have their time, but then gone. Mugabe. He's gone now. The next African dictator that'll rise up this year.

He'll have his time, but then he'll be gone as well. And why? Because the Lord blows on them, and they wither. And like chaff on the wind, they just fly away to wherever chaff goes.

Verse 25. To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One. God is the only. And even as Christians, even though we're forgiven of our sins ultimately, lots of the crises of this year coming will want us to, will shake our faith in the Lord.

They'll put us right alongside Israel and their complaint in verse 27. Why do you complain, Jacob? Why do you say, Israel, my way is hidden from the Lord?

See, maybe we'll be tempted to say, God can't see my problems. My way is hidden. Or God doesn't care. My cause is disregarded by my God. He doesn't care about what's going on in my life.

[28 : 50] Read verse 28 and be comforted. Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary. And he's understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall.

The Lord is coming to rescue you. He won't get too tired or weary to complete the job. He's not too stupid to know how to save. His plan of salvation, no one can understand.

He won't suffer from a lack of perseverance as even the most determined people can. He is the source of power and strength. He gives it to the weary when 2018 leaves you weak.

You see, this is a message to people when every resource has run out. And often it's when we're at our lowest, when we're at our most desperate, that we truly understand this point.

[29 : 56] See, it's as God brings Israel low, maybe it's as he has brought you low this past year, when we're all too aware of the endless cycle of sin and then judgment, that this chapter will come as a comfort to you.

God is unlike the idols. He's unlike people. We're just grass. He's unlike the rulers of the world. He's unlike everything else in the universe.

He came once to save us in Jesus. He's coming again to save us from this world. Let me finish. I'll read verse 31.

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint. And why?

Because their hope is in the Lord and he is the only. Our Father God, we declare as one people that you are the only.

[31 : 04] We praise you for your power and your majesty, for how holy and unlike everything else in the universe you are. And we cry out, Father, that we need a rescue from this world.

The disasters of the future are too much for us. Please comfort us as we wait for Jesus to return again.

We ask it in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Bye-bye.