

The Record of Israel's Saviour

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[0:00] So do open your Bibles back up again to Isaiah 43. That's where we're going to spend our time this morning. Who is merciful and gracious, who corrects and helps and encourages.

Lord, we need all those things today. So as we come to your word, would you speak to us afresh? Write your word on our hearts and change our lives that we might know your true refreshment.

In Jesus' name. Amen. So should he stay or should he go? That's the question for today. I'm not turned on. Let's try that again. How's that? Should he stay or should he go?

Not talking about Keir Starmer. He's about to go. He's got one day left as Prime Minister. But Thomas Tuchel, the England manager. Should he stay or should he go?

Yes, OK. He got us to the semifinals of the World Cup. But frankly, it was by the skin of our teeth. And when we needed courage and confidence in that semifinal, he packed the team with defenders and retreated, defended and just hoped for the best.

[1:32] Sure, I wasn't the only one of you shouting at the TV on Wednesday night. And what's worse, he seems to have been taking no responsibility for it. Not really, anyway. No hands up. I got it wrong.

Just a desire to carry on doing the same things. Presumably making the same mistakes. And if you do those things, of course, you repeat the same things and you get the same result, don't you?

Of course you do. Get close, but never close enough. And of course, with every failure, every near miss, the glory of 1966 becomes a bigger burden. There's now 60 years of hurt.

But we continue to be a nation that, in football terms, keeps looking backwards to that past glory and failing to grasp it in the present. Well, how like God's Old Testament people of Israel.

They were like that. They kept looking back, but it didn't mean anything to them. Not really. They weren't living it out. I think sometimes as Christians we can do the same as well.

[2:33] We can be looking back, but not knowing God's work and saving power in our lives today, right now. Just a reminder of the context of this section of Isaiah.

Isaiah may have been writing years before these events happened, but in the power of the Spirit, he looked ahead to the fall and destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.

And he wrote chapters 40 to 55 to those who would end up surviving that, but being taken to exile in Babylon. Despite that, these chapters would have spoken to those whose descendants would have gone on to endure those things.

So the ones weren't alive when Isaiah was writing, as well as to those who were there. But they have a lot to say to us as well. So as I said, both they and we are often guilty of the same things.

As we spend our time looking back with longing and delight at God's past victories, at his past work in us, whilst living anything but joy-filled, God-centred lives right now.

[3:35] So if you want a summary of where we're going this morning, here's my sentence. The glorious victories God won for us in the past are meant to shape our life and expectations of God's work here in the present.

What happened in the past is meant to have an impact now. Not just in our memories, but in our lives. For the Jews that had seen Jerusalem taken, the temple destroyed, maybe been carried off to Babylon in chains, God's victories in the past must have seemed like ancient history, mustn't they? Well, that's great for them. But what does it mean now? Glorious history, but a long way in the rearview mirror. Maybe as you think about the state of the church across the nation, far weaker and smaller than it once was, you have that same kind of feeling.

Or maybe you feel that way about the nation as a whole, with the glories of empire and Churchill and national pride little more than memories. But here's the thing. When we look at all those things that we think we've lost, God hasn't changed.

One of the encouragements that we'll find this morning, there's plenty of challenge here, but there are great encouragements too. God hasn't changed. That's where this passage begins. Isaiah is addressing those in exile, but he is telling them he is still their redeemer.

[4:58] Not that I was the redeemer of the people back then. I am still your redeemer. I am still your Lord, your creator, your king. He is still the Holy One of Israel.

He hasn't changed. They needed to know that. They needed to hold on to that, and so do we. It's been great to see the church here at St. Paul's grow over the last couple of years.

But let's not kid ourselves. Even with all six of our Benefice churches added together, we are still a tiny minority in our town. There are never queues to get in.

No people camping out the night before to get a good view. We're not having to think about planting new churches because we've got so many people, we don't know what to do with them. And we're honest about that and see the way much of society is going.

It's easy to think, well, God's power was for people back then in previous generations. Now, well, we're just destined to endure a dull, painful slog until we die or Jesus comes back.

[6:02] And that's it. But friends, that is not the case. That is not the case. The God who rescued Israel from slavery with such mighty acts of power is the same God who raised Jesus from the dead and who broke the power of sin and death on the cross.

It's the same God who is with us now by his spirit. He has not changed. I think that's why Isaiah's command to the people in verse 18 to forget the former things isn't a command to ignore them.

So just, you know, don't recall the rescue from Egypt anymore. See, the Jews were supposed to celebrate the Passover year after year, weren't they? So they didn't forget in the same way that we're called to remember Jesus' death on the cross until he comes again.

We do that regularly every other week with bread and wine. And just as Old Testament people's identity was formed by that rescue in Egypt, ours is formed by Jesus' rescue on the cross.

But if we're not careful, history can get dull and distant if it is not lived out in the presence. If it's just a memory, a dry old story, then it's no use.

[7:13] And what's more, if our eyes are just casting backwards saying, oh, wasn't it great then? We will never live now in the light and fullness of all that God has for us and has done for us.

That's what the second half of verse 14 is pointing to. God's redeemed people, those he had rescued from slavery in Egypt, taken to the promised land, were now in a new exile due to their own sin.

But the God who saved them then was coming to bring them home now. Did you notice that? The Babylonians who had captured God's people would themselves be taken away as captives.

He was coming to bring his people home. Verses 19 to 21 are a beautiful description of God's saving work for them. Just as he provided water from the rock on that first trip from exile to the promised land through Moses.

Remember when he struck the rock and commanded the rock? So he, God says, as his people travel back now from Babylon, he will make streams in the desert to run alongside the road he would lay for them.

[8:21] And notice how he speaks of his people. They are his people. They were formed for him. They are his chosen ones.

They might not have been living like it, quite the opposite in fact, but God hadn't distanced himself from them. He hadn't given up on them. They still belong to him. I wonder if this morning you feel that you're in some kind of spiritual exile.

Walking through a long desert. It's just all a bit dry. Yes, you're here in church today, or perhaps you're watching and listening online. But actually, if you're honest, you feel a long way from God. In the back of your mind, you can still remember the thrill of becoming a Christian.

Remembering for the first time that Jesus had died for you. And that you, with all your sin and mess and shame, could be forgiven. You've now been adopted into God's family. You knew you were a beloved child of God.

And as you look back to those days, well, then the cross was precious. Church was a privilege. Singing, oh, it came from your heart as true worship.

[9:34] And the Bible was food for your soul, and you couldn't get enough of it. In the words from the Song of Solomon, you knew that the beloved was yours and you were his. And it was beautiful.

But today, just a bit hard. Today, all that joy, that peace, that intimacy seems a long, long time ago.

If that's how you feel this morning, then hear the word of the Lord for you today, through Isaiah. Don't dwell on the past. See, I'm doing a new thing.

I'm making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland to give drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself, that they may proclaim my praise.

The God who brought you out of darkness and into his marvellous light all those years ago stands ready to do that today.

[10 : 31] In fact, he's already made those preparations for you. And like God's exiled people, the only thing that stops that revival and renewal in our lives and in God's church as a whole is us.

It's our attitudes. It's our reluctance to come. And by the way, if you've never yet come to Jesus, then this offer is there for you too, whoever you are, whatever your life is like.

Jesus offers all those who come to him lasting joy and deep peace, complete forgiveness, and life that doesn't end. All available through Christ when we come to him.

Well, there's some wonderful encouragements in those verses, but there are some challenges too. As I said, the thing that stops us from living like this is our own frailties, our own failure to live as we should.

Three things that I think these last few verses of this passage point out to us. Formal religion, unconfessed sin, and illogical fear.

[11 : 36] All of them were a problem for ancient Israel. All three are a problem for the church today. One or more of them might be a problem for you at the moment. Well, let's look at them in turn.

Formal religion. One of the joys of our benefits is I think we've got pretty much every kind of Anglican worship nailed within the benefits. It is here, whatever style you like.

And my hope and prayer is that each one of those churches grows and thrives so that we do need to plant more services and more churches to fit all the people in who want to get to know God and follow him.

And it doesn't really bother me what kind of pattern those churches take. But sometimes in my mind, I equate a certain kind of worship with spiritual life.

But that isn't true. That isn't true. Just because a style of worship is more formal doesn't mean that it's dry. Because it's modern, it doesn't mean that it brings life.

[12 : 38] Actually, what Isaiah is getting at here is not about style, but about reality. What's going on in the heart of the worshipper. See, when Isaiah wrote these words, temple worship was flourishing.

And it would have looked amazing. There would have been great smells of the sacrifices, choirs singing, sacrifices and prayers being made, all in a stunning building, all the clergy wearing robes that were wonderfully embroidered.

They must have been really hot in them, though, mustn't they? But there we go. It would have looked and sounded incredible. And it was all meant to show the awesomeness and holiness of God, to be a way for the Jews to come and worship and know deep, deep down in their souls the love and pardon, the grace and greatness of God.

But familiarity had bred carelessness, perhaps even a little contempt. So notice how Isaiah speaks of them not bringing sheep for burnt offerings or grain offerings or calamus as incense to God.

You have not brought me these things, God says to them. They had been bringing them there. Don't think for a moment that all of a sudden all those Old Testament sacrifices had stopped.

[13 : 51] They were still doing all the same things. They brought all of these sacrifices, all at the right time, but they hadn't brought them to God, not yet.

Their religious observance had become a dead formality. They'd be doing it to be seen because it's what their parents expected. Maybe they did it for themselves, just for a bit of fun to do on a Sabbath day.

Maybe they did it to try and put God in their debt. If I do this, then he will do that for me. They may have had all kinds of reasons for doing these sacrifices, but they weren't doing it for God's.

It wasn't for his glory. It wasn't out of a thankful, delighted heart. For some of them, these sacrifices may have been weary and wearing day after day, year after year.

Actually, God designed the law so these times together were a joy. For some of them, though, it may have been rather repetitive, but for God, he was wearied by the emptiness of what he saw.

[14 : 59] People coming, saying as if they were coming to worship him, but having nothing in their hearts. If you're honest, how true is that for you this morning?

When you sing the hymns and songs, is it really worship and praise? When you come along to church Sunday by Sunday, does it bring you real joy, no matter what the service is or who's preaching?

Does your working and giving and serving delight your hearts when you do that? However costly it is, or is it all a little bit like a chore? Something you know you should do and will do, but the joy is long gone.

Well, if that's the case, friends, God is as grieved and burdened by our formal religion, our empty worshippers, as he was over his ancient people. Formal religion is a killer to the soul, and it does not bring us life.

Neither does unconfessed sin. It wasn't just the empty sacrifices that had wearied the Lord, but the sin of those he had called to be holy as he was holy. And they didn't seem to bother.

[16 : 19] Think if I'm honest, over my Christian life, I've used pretty much every excuse there is for not living as I know God commands. I don't know whether you recognise any of these.

Well, it feels right, so it must be right. God wants me to be happy, so this is okay. I was tired, so it doesn't count.

I'm sure good will come of it, so I'll press on. A bit of rebellion is fine, because I would appreciate God's grace more that way.

Oh, it's just how I'm made. Can't help it, it's in my genes. I saw that other Christian do it, the vicar do it, a bishop approve of it, so what's the issue?

Or this one, it doesn't matter. God loves me as I am, and I'll still be in church, on Sunday, so surely what happens away from church doesn't count.

[17 : 20] I've used all of those excuses at one point or another, but they are just excuses, aren't they? Phrases that we use, that we say to ourselves to stop us needing to come to God in honest repentance.

But when sin has that grip on us, when we hear or read God's word clearly, showing us the right way, and refuse to do it, well, the end result is that that closeness with God wanes, and we begin to feel so, so lost.

That feeling can be driven by a deep-rooted pride. It's my life, I'll live in my way, or it's arrogant self-pity.

I've messed up, but God's forgiveness won't reach to me. I'm too bad, I'm the exception. Neither are helpful, because they both leave us in our sin. Verses 25 to 28 explain God's perspective.

Amazingly, he knows what we're like. Just as he knows what our forebears were like, he sees the frailties in those who are supposed to lead and teach by example. He knows it all.

[18 : 32] In fact, the reason the people were in Babylon, if you remember, was these kind of sins. And yet, look how God describes himself. I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake and remembers your sin no more.

When we get stuck in underattemptive sin, God stands there and says, I'm the God who's here to forgive you. Come to me and ask. We have a God who cleanses all who repent.

And when those sins are confessed, God doesn't just sort of file them away to refer to next time.

No, he takes them away as far as the east is from the west so that we are left washed, cleansed, forgiven.

God's ability to treat our sins in this way is for his sake. It's for his glory so he can be seen as merciful and gracious and to show us that he is just in the way he deals with us.

Maybe you think that's an odd thing to do. How can God show he is just by forgiving us? Well, it's because Jesus has already paid the penalty for our sin on the cross.

[19 : 46] And since the penalty has been paid, when we come to God and ask for what Jesus died to give us, well, he is just then by forgiving us.

The price has been paid. He need to ask nothing more. God's Old Testament people, the sacrifices in the temple pointed forward towards the cross.

But we look back to it, don't we? Either way, there is no need for us any longer to continue in those patterns of sin and rebellion for the power of sin has been defeated.

And there is nothing now to stop us coming to God and asking for forgiveness. Jesus died for that.

No reason at all except that desire to continue in that rebellion or to doubt that God's promises apply to us.

Does that sound familiar? There's one more problem here that Isaiah identifies for us and that's a fear of what's coming if we give our lives to him.

[20:53] Because coming to Jesus and living for Jesus will mean change. We know that, right? When we belong to him, we belong to him and not to ourselves any longer. that means he sets the pattern and he sets the rules.

We're called to realign our priorities, to reject the devil and all rebellion against God. Those were our baptism declarations. Being a disciple of Jesus means that his lordship sits over every area of our lives, our relationships, our time, our money, how we use our talents and opportunities.

If we're following Jesus, it should be seen in our words and our attitudes and our actions, in what we will do and what we won't do. And there is a cost to that.

There is a cost to that. Jesus calls it dying to self and taking up our cross. That's why he calls us to count the cost before we start.

Because it may cost us friends, it may refocus our ambitions, it may reshape our lives. And if we're honest, those kind of things when we look ahead to them, well, that's rather a scary prospect, isn't it?

[22:06] Because I think we're honest, most of us want a life of peace and tranquility. Just a quiet life, actually, where we can get on with our own thing, where nobody bothers us and we bother no one else.

Is that what you long for? And then we meet Jesus and he shakes his all up. Maybe he tells us to leave our nets and follow him.

Maybe he tells us to give up something costly as he did to the rich young ruler. Sell what you have, give it away, come follow me. When he calls us to follow him, we need to be prepared to have our lives shaken up, perhaps our families divided because now Jesus is our king.

So maybe the fear of following Jesus isn't quite so illogical after all, but of course it is ultimately. Because just as settling for a formal religion is counterproductive, just as remaining in our with unconfessed sin leaves us missing out.

So being fearful of what God might do in us and through us leaves us dry and thirsty. Skeletal Christians, a fraction of what we might be.

[23:19] And this again is where we need to see the goodness of God and the love of God for us. If we can only grasp the height and depth and breadth and love of God, if we can see God as he truly is, then these issues start to shrink in size and we can begin to walk into the glorious freedom and joy of the people of God.

So as we close, look down at verses 1 to 5 of chapter 44. Remember that God's patience with his Old Testament people wasn't just over a matter of weeks or months but over centuries.

Over that time the Lord had sent prophets and messages and kings and angels to point them back to the right way for them to give up their dead religion, their rebellion and sinfulness, their fear of obedience.

And even now with his people in exile, God had not forgiven or given up with them. Notice he calls them again, my servant, my chosen, the one who made you.

The one who met you together in the womb, the one who brought you life. It's a father talking to their child, isn't it? The word Jeshurun there in verse 2 means loved one or sweetheart, darling.

[24:37] Imagine a mother whispering in the ear of a grown up child who will always be their baby. God's That's the tenderness that God is speaking towards his Old Testament people, despite all they had done.

Here the Lord is saying, you're mine, I love you, don't be afraid, don't remain in a dry place, come to me, let me refresh you, don't stay in your sin, ask, and I'll renew and forgive you.

desire me, come after me, seek me, and you'll be filled to overflow with the goodness, peace and power of God. The image of the water flowing here is pointing us forward to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit who since that first Pentecost has been in and with all believers. What else can take away our fear more than knowing God is with us now?

Jesus talked about the Spirit as a spring of water within us, welling up to eternal life, bringing us true refreshments. These now flow within the life of the believer, bringing life and joy and peace, flowing out in fruitfulness and Christ likeness.

[25 : 56] If only, if only we will make sure that our worship and obedience is not dry, that we are remaining in unconfessed sin, refusing to follow out of fear, there is no true satisfaction in that dry form of religion, just as there is no peace when we live with unconfessed persistent sin in our lives and when through habit or pride or fear, we keep God at arm's length where we miss out on the relationship that Jesus died to bring us.

God is so here's my question for you today, is it time for you to seek God again? To dust off your Bible, to deepen your prayer life, to make Sunday worship a time when you seek God and you give him all the glory he deserves?

Maybe today is a day when you need to recognise that the thing you're excusing is in fact sin and you come to God for forgiveness and power to change.

Maybe you know what God is calling you to do and there are fears around that but maybe today is the day when you need to say, you know what Lord, I'm going to trust you. You called me and you saved me and you kept me and you are with me and I'm going to step out with you today in a renewed faith.

It's today, the day when you stand and declare with those in verse 5 who say, you know what, I belong to the Lord. I'm his. I'm going to write his name on my hands so I don't forget it.

[27 : 38] If so, then come. That's the invitation we give him. Come. Remember God's saving work, trust in his unchanging character, accept his grace and pray for the refreshment of the spirit to renew his work within you.

For in Jesus, there is water for your dry soul, there is pardon for your sin and the adventure of a life lived with and for the God of all glory.

And there is nothing better than that. Amen. Amen.