

The Uniqueness of Israel's Rescuer

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[0:00] Thank you. Let's pray, shall we, as we come to God's word together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your written words, inspired by your spirit.

! Lord, would you, by your grace, now open our minds to understand it, our hearts to believe it, and our wills to bend to it, both for our good and for your great glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, if you've got your finger back in Matthew chapter 13, do swap there just for a moment. It's a passage where Jesus tells six very quick parables about the kingdom of God.

We haven't got time for full exposition. There we go. I thought I'd done that a moment ago. We haven't got time for a full exposition this morning of those parables, but they do tie in very well with what we're coming to later on.

So let's have a very, very brief look. Those first two parables, the mustard seed and the yeast, they have the same kind of meaning, don't they? The kingdom of God may look very small, it may look very weak, but ultimately its impact and size is going to be vast.

[1:15] It is ultimately the most significant thing in the universe. The next two parables, the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price, also have the same kind of meaning.

Nothing we have is of greater value than being in God's kingdom, and we should stop at nothing to have it. Then those last two parables, the parable of the net, shows why it's important, because Jesus teaches here that there is an eternal reckoning coming.

Those outside God's kingdom, those who haven't recognised its great value, and who have instead pursued other gods, will one day realise the awful stupidity of their decision, but by then it will be too late.

And I suspect that last short parable, it's almost a saying really, isn't it? About pulling out treasures old and new. Well, we're going to do that this morning. We've looked briefly at the New Testament, teachings of Jesus, but there are teachings in the Old Testament, actually, which back up exactly what Jesus has said.

And that was there in our passages in Isaiah, chapter 44. And I think the points he makes are strikingly similar. Strikingly similar.

[2:28] So turn back to that now. Isaiah chapter 44. Here's a summary of where we're going this morning. The Lord Almighty may look small compared to the gods of Babylon, maybe to the gods of our age as well, but he actually is the only God there is.

And when God shows himself in all his glory, the foolishness of those who have aligned themselves with other gods and false idols will ultimately be revealed. That's where we're heading.

Now, all this talk of idols and other gods may sound rather odd. I don't imagine there's anyone here, and you can tell me over coffee if this is wrong, who have personal shrines somewhere in your house.

Somewhere with a little tin idol or a gold-plated idol or something where you sit and burn incense and light candles and make your prayers. I'd be very surprised if that was the case.

So maybe it feels a little bit weird that we're focusing on that this morning. What relevance can it possibly have? But there are plenty of false gods that don't need incense and aren't depicted in little statues.

[3:36] And we know what they are. There are those things that seek to grab God's place on the throne of our lives and take over. Just elbowing him out just a little and just a little more.

Money, popularity, status, power, success, pleasure, independence, sex, health, even family. And whilst many of these are good things in themselves, and they are good things in themselves, when they become our idol, something which we are unable and unwilling to give up for the sake of Christ, something we love more than Jesus, then for all intents and purposes, is we have a little idol

somewhere in our hearts.

Something that we look to and rely on to give us all that we most desire. That's what an idol is. So don't switch off this morning.

Don't think it doesn't apply just because you don't have a little tin idol or a gold, silver icon somewhere. This applies to all of us, me included. As I said earlier on, our hearts are idol factories. And we can so easily turn a good thing into a God thing. And we must keep check on that. And keep an eye on those things to which our love and devotion is being given.

[5:00] Because the Lord needs to have prime place in all those things. With that in mind, here are the four questions we're going to work through. Two, why might God have looked weak to the Israelites in captivity?

And why might he look weak to us today? That's question one. Number two, why were they and why are we then tempted to create idols in God's place?

Number three, why is that stupid? Let's be blunt about that. Why is that stupid? And fourthly, why should we instead love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, and all our strength?

Why is he worth it? Well, that's question one then. Why might God have looked weak to the Israelites in captivity and to us today? Some of you will be relieved that the World Cup is now over. I'm sure there are a few of you out there thinking, great, no more football talk. Well, there is still a lot of football talk. There's always football talk. And lots of England fans out there, myself included, who think we have missed a chance.

[6:03] That actually we should have beaten Argentina. And if we had, we had a really good chance of getting past Spain and winning the World Cup for the first time in 60 years. Maybe you agree with me.

But I don't think there is anyone from Iraq who is thinking the same thing. Why would they? They played three matches. They lost all three. They scored one goal and conceded 12.

They finished with the worst record of all those teams. No one was thinking Iraq was a strong footballing nation. Now think about Israel in captivity.

Their country had been overrun. Their capital city taken. Their people slaughtered. Their leaders either killed or taken prisoner. The temple of the God on whose command the nation was established and who was worshipped in that temple as the only true God.

Well, that temple had been ransacked and looted and then burned to the ground. You can imagine, can't you, just how depressed and down they felt by all that.

[7:12] None of them believed that their nation was an unlucky loser. It wasn't close. They had been utterly defeated. And I guess many of them thought about the God they worshipped as a God who had let them down.

And maybe a God who, actually, when it came to the crunch, had been too weak. Too weak to save them. So maybe as they were chatting together they were saying things like this.

Well, maybe we were wrong, you know. Maybe our God isn't the only God after all. Maybe the gods of Babylon are stronger. Maybe we should worship them instead or maybe as well.

Let's cover all bases here, shall we? Because you never know. I wonder if you can understand how they might have said that. Having been so utterly defeated, they looked at what they could see with their eyes and went, you know what, I'm not sure about this anymore.

For some of God's people that was the conclusion they drew. I wonder whether some of us here and many in our country today feel the same.

[8:21] See, growing up in rural Bedfordshire, I don't think I met anyone who followed any other religion until I was well into my teens. There just weren't any. There was nobody from anywhere, any other country actually, growing up in that town.

It wasn't until in my late teens that I met someone who was a Muslim and someone else who was a Sikh. But today our nation is very multicultural. There are temples, gurdwaras, mosques all over the place.

And that fact alone has led many Christians to doubt whether Jesus can really be the only way to God. Well, look at all these other parts. They can't all be wrong, surely. So let's water down Jesus a bit.

And then there is the media. I don't know whether you've seen the new latest Nature epic on the BBC proclaiming loudly that all the immense beauty and complexity in creation that we sang about in that first hymn, well, all of it, according to that program, is a product of random evolution.

that human beings have not been made or designed, that there is clearly no God behind it all. Does science have all the answers?

[9:30] Do we need gods? And then we look at the state of our nation. The number of people calling them Christians has dropped. Christian morals are undermined.

The Church of England looks weaker and more worldly. And it's easy to think to ourselves, maybe the things that I was brought up to believe that we recite in the Creed, maybe that's not the whole truth.

Or maybe it's not true at all. Maybe this God I worship is just quite a weak God. Maybe I need to change where and in whom I put my faith.

Maybe you can understand why people might say that. I mean, they would be wrong. The whole Bible and the whole of church history would shout, no, don't do it.

But can you understand why people might? Just going on what we see, well, that's how it looks, rather like the mustard seed or the yeast.

[10:28] It looks so tiny, doesn't it? Can that really have this kind of transforming power? Well, that leads to question two. Why were those Israelites? Why are we sometimes tempted to create an idol in God's place?

Well, I think that follows on quite naturally, really. Once we've taken that first step of doubting the rightness and trueness and uniqueness of the God of the Bible, who reveals himself fully in Jesus, it's easy then to take the next step and place our faith in something or someone else.

Everyone worships something, whether they say they do or not. We do. Islam looks strong. I'll follow that. Science seems to have all the answers. I'll place my hope there. Eternity seems a long, long way off.

I'll find my pleasure and happiness now. The gods of Babylon have conquered my God. Better follow them. Make me an idol, would you, Mr. Goldsmith?

Mr. Carpenter? That's what Isaiah describes in this chapter, isn't it? The blacksmith, taking a tour, works with it in the coals. He shapes an idol with hammers. He forges it with the might of his arm.

[11:38] The carpenter measures the line, makes an outline with a marker, roughs it out with chisels, marks it with compasses. He shapes it in human form, human form in all its glory, that it may dwell in a shrine.

He cuts down Caesars, maybe took a cypress or an oak, fashions a God and worships it. He makes an idol, bows down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, save me, you are my God.

Well, like many Eastern religions today, Babylonian worship, a lot of that took place in the home.

Well, little idols were made to order and then worshipped as representations of the gods.

They would burn incense and make sacrifices and prayers were presented. And as the Israelites were spending their time in captivity, seeing that the might of Babylon, many of them started to do the same.

Couldn't get to the temple. Looked like their God had been defeated. Here is something new. A representation of the gods of Babylon.

[12:42] So they did the same. They got someone to create a little idol and that thing became the focus of their worship and their hope, their faith and their devotion. And it moved from God or maybe moved entirely from God or partially from God onto this little thing in their house.

Now that may sound utterly ridiculous. Why on earth would you do that? And we'll see why it is in a moment. But as I said earlier, not all false gods have statues.

Not all worship happens in a shrine. And sadly, from time to time, we will, if we're honest, start to do something very similar.

Because according to the Bible, when we worship idols, when we replace wholehearted worship of the one true God with the desire to do something else, to worship something else, we're engaging in idolatry.

There's nothing physical that's there. But that's what we're doing. God has been moved off his throne. And it can happen very subtly.

[13:52] It starts in our minds with our thinking. So maybe we look at Mr. Walter Witness who sits near us in church. We hear how he's been trying to tell his family about Jesus, but now they have disowned him because he won't shut up about his faith in Christ.

And we think, well, if I might lose my family over this, then I'll learn that lesson. I'll never speak the name of Jesus out loud. I'll keep quiet. And so family moves God off the throne.

We look at Catherine Cash. She arrives in her posh new car and we hear about the holidays she's had and where she now buys her clothes and they're all designer luxury labels and we go, oh, I'd love that.

I'd love that. And when that job opportunity comes up to take a better position that pays much more money but requires us to work longer hours and most Sundays we go, you know what?

I'd rather have those things than be part of God's worshipping committee. And so possessions and greed push Jesus off the throne.

[15:02] Harry Hart is looking down. We ask him why. It turns out that he's ended a relationship because it was pulling him away from God. We think, what? Surely you could have both.

Eternity is a long way off. I'd rather be happy now. Let's see if I can just snuggle that relationship onto the throne alongside God and have both. And so our priorities get adjusted.

And then there's Felicity Firm who tells us that she's lost her job. she refused to follow some new guidelines that went against the teachings of the Bible.

She was disciplined and fired. And sadly, she's now got all kinds of money worries. She might lose our house over it. Note to self, we say. Note to self. If I face that same kind of challenge, I'll just keep quiet.

I'll just keep quiet. I'll compromise in that situation because my financial security and that of my family is far more important than Christian principles.

[16:06] I could go on, but do you see the pattern? When we feel that our God is weak, when we don't feel that we can find all that we truly desire in him, or when we feel he has let us down in some way, when we've been seemingly to us robbed of our happiness now, when a choice becomes costly obedience to Christ and taking a different path, we give in.

Maybe only a little bit. Maybe it's only a small little statue that rests in our hearts. But as we do that, we are in effect replacing Jesus as the sole object of our worship and devotion.

Whether that's by our family or our work or our financial security or whatever else it may be. I don't know if you can recognise and remember times when you've done that. I can.

There's a long list of them. A long list of them. Sometimes in small ways. Sometimes I've kept quiet just to keep the peace, just to save myself from hassle.

Sometimes I've changed my diary around, stopped something. I know it was a good thing because that over there looked better. sometimes my finances have become much more self-centred.

[17:31] Sometimes it's happened in larger ways too. Time in my life when I got into and then stayed in a relationship that I knew wasn't right. But I kept going.

other times I've accepted envy as normal and had a real problem looking at others and wanting what they had. The point is a simple one, isn't it?

We don't need little idols to give our heart devotion to someone or something else other than the one true God. love. And if we're not careful it can take over and drag us away.

We often, I think in my Christian life there's been lots of times when I've tried to keep one foot in the world and one foot on Christ. And you try and balance a little bit.

But bit by bit those two paths move apart and you find yourself splitting off and you have to make a choice. And sometimes I've gone completely the wrong way. And that's a crazy thing to do.

[18:38] Isaiah explains that now. I think he does a great job of demonstrating the folly of why building and worshipping little idol is so silly. He says very clearly they're as weak as the one who made them, verse 12.

If the blacksmith gets tired even putting it together what use is an idol going to be for you? It wears out the person who put it there. They're made from something that is used for other base purposes, verses 15 to 19.

How stupid to worship something made from the same wood we do our cooking with. That doesn't make sense. And of course these idols, verse 18, can't see and they can't speak.

So they don't know anything. There's no truth there to impart. There's no wisdom that they can give to bring us any comfort. If they knew it, which they don't, they couldn't tell us because they can't speak.

And of course they have no power to act or save or help, verse 20. What is the point of bringing any prayer or devotion to them? It's less fruitless than calling the speaking clock when your house is burning down.

[19:44] Is there still a speaking clock? I don't know. But at least the speaking clock told you what time your house was on fire. Didn't do you any good, but it told you something. Not these idols.

They've got nothing to say. What about our own idols? Wealth, happiness, popularity, success, pleasure, family, sex, all the rest. Well, I guess in some extent they do provide us with some warmth or joy in the present, don't they?

And that's why they look so alluring. But you see, we might be warming ourselves by the fire of these things, but that fire will eventually go out.

It doesn't last. The career we pour our energy into will come to an end. The success we sought will be superseded by someone else.

The people we pour our love into will die or let us down. The possessions we desire will break or wear out. The experiences we think will truly satisfy us, well, they don't do that anymore.

[20:50] And we're left broken and empty wondering where it all went wrong. wondering where we might have found the peace and joy and satisfaction and undying love that we really craved all along.

Well, think back to those parables of Jesus. The answer is there. See, for all of us this morning, we have within our grasp the pearl of great price and the greatest treasure ever discovered.

But sometimes we see that and we go, actually, I'm going to go with what I've got instead. I'll stick with this. We pay too much attention to the apparent present weakness of the kingdom of God.

We fail to take the eternal view. We fail to look ahead and say, well, where does it all end? Not where will I be in five years? How will this help me to get there? But where will I be in 105 years? Because I guarantee none of us will be here. We follow too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have erred and strayed like lost sheep. We have found our spiritual health fading like a flower as a result.

[22:01] But the wonder of the God of the Bible is that he remains faithful even when we are unfaithful. We have a God who comes seeking us when we run away.

Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, we have a father standing there waiting, robe in hand, ring ready to give us when we turn and come home.

And that is the point of Isaiah's message here. It's not simply to show the folly of forsaking God for idols so we feel crushed or stupid. It's to help us to see the greatness of God in comparison with anything else that might try to take his place.

And that's where we're going to end. On a really positive note. Why should we instead love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength? Well, verse 6 alone gives us at least five reasons.

He's a God who speaks. Idols can't, wealth can't, God can and he does. By his word, through his spirit, God speaks his clear, unchanging truth to us.

[23:05] He gives us truths to live by. His words are words of life and joy and peace. We have a God who speaks. We have a God who rules.

Idols have no strength but the God of the Bible, the Lord of hosts. Well, he rules over his world. He's the one with ultimate power. He shapes and directs history.

He calls a people to himself and directs the path of nations. Why would we give him up for something else? He redeems us.

Our God is a God who saves. For the Jews, that meant looking back to the escape from Egypt. Soon, the generation Isaiah is writing to here would go, you know what, we've got another rescue as well.

Because he saved us from Babylon and brought us home. We look to the cross and we find there a God who has given himself for us, who saved us at great personal cost.

[24:04] Idols take and take and take. God gives us himself. Fourthly, we have a God who is. The idols, Isaiah speaks of, are shaped and crafted.

Our God is the uncreated one. Wood rots, metal, rusts, just as all the things we seek after in this world will pass. Not the Lord, my friends, not the Lord.

He is the eternal one. He was there before all things and he will outlast all things. And fifthly, he alone is God. He alone is God.

The world may say that's a terribly arrogant position. Not so the Bible. The Bible shouts this truth from every single page. The Lord is God and there is no other.

There are plenty of pretenders to his throne, plenty of other things that would take his place. None deserves it and ultimately none will have it. Isaiah goes on in verse seven, declare that God alone

can explain the past and know the future.

[25 : 10] Actually, if the Israelites had bothered to read the scriptures that they had, they would have known the situation they were in was down to their disobedience and known that their prayers would get answered and God would rescue them.

Deep down, they knew the reason why they were there. If only they would remember and come back. God is a God who knows the future and who shapes that future.

And the beauty and wonder of the God of the Bible who is all these things is that for these idol-worshipping, faithless people, there is a way back to God.

A way back home. He doesn't cut them off and say, that's it, I'm finished with you. No, no. Verses 21 to 23 make that clear, don't they? God reminds them who these people are.

They are God's chosen people, the people who belong to him, his beloved servant. Elsewhere, the Psalms speak about our names being engraved on the palms of God's hand.

[26 : 12] Engraved, not with one of those little tattoo things, you know, a nice tiny name. When the Bible talks about our names being engraved in God's hand, it's almost like a chisel has come out.

It goes deep. You can picture in your mind the time when God's hands were pierced by something like that. That's our names being written there.

And then he tells them this in verse 22. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you.

There is the past tense here. God has already forgiven them. The price of their redemption has already been paid. All that stopped them from entering again into this intimate, loving, joy-filled, peace-bringing relationship with the God who made them, called them and saved them is their reluctance to come.

Return to me, for I have redeemed you. It's God's words to us today. If other things have crept onto his throne, return to me, I love you, I have redeemed you.

[27 : 29] I know that trusting God is hard. I know it is. We can't see him, we can't touch him.

Usually his voice is inaudible. And if we're honest, most of his glorious promises don't find their true fulfillment until the kingdom to come.

But at the same time, see, the gods of the age are tangible, aren't they? We can hold them, we can see them. Compared to the kingdom of heaven and to the God who calls us into being, well, some of those things start to look quite attractive in the here and now.

God's words, not the lies of the evil one.

Let us daily seek to re-grasp the true value of all that is ours in Christ and fix our eyes on him, the God who rules and speaks and lasts and redeems and forgives.

And a few moments, we're going to remember God's glorious work of redemption for us as we gather around the Lord's table and receive those tokens of bread and wine. And as you kneel where this morning, make sure you're kneeling in your heart and mind too.

[28 : 53] There's no one else on the throne of the gods who you are gathering to receive from. And if there is a battle going on right now, be honest about it. Ask God for his help.

He will be there. We are all sinners in need of God's grace. We're all weak in need of God's strength. But through Jesus, grace and strength are there for all who ask.

May our hearts be devoted to him. Amen.