

Formed By God For God

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Preacher: Rev. James Maciver

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn together now to the passage we read, to Isaiah 44, and we're going to focus especially on verse 21, taking in the verses before that as we've read through them.

Remember these things, O Jacob and Israel, for you are my servant. I formed you, you are my servant. O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.

Of all the books in the Bible that show the futility of idolatry, Isaiah is probably foremost in his polemic against idolatry.

And all the way through the book of Isaiah, you've got the practice of his day that he was so much against, just as God had placed him there to bring this message to the people, having gone astray so badly in their idolatrous ways.

You find Isaiah in devastating critiques of idolatry, showing up the futility and the foolishness of such practices.

[1 : 13] For example, you find it in verses 9 here to 20, where Isaiah really ridicules the idea of idolatry. And of course, although we're talking here about idolatry that had specific objects carved, either out of wood or out of metal, we know that idolatry really covers as a term all alternatives to God that people would give their hearts to.

Every kind of devotion that replaces God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, with either an object or a person or something else to venerate instead of him, or even alongside of him, which in effect was what Israel and Judah were doing.

It wasn't that they were just consciously saying, we don't want our God, the God we had of our fathers anymore, let's just go for these gods that we can make for ourselves.

They were quite convinced that this was really quite legitimate for them to place before themselves, and that they were worshipping God by that. And Isaiah shows how ridiculous the whole thing is.

And what he says is, how can it possibly be that an object that a human being forms for themselves can then come to be something before which he falls down and says, you are my God, deliver me.

[2 : 40] How can something created by us possibly be our deliverer when we're in trouble? And all the way through, Isaiah, in his own way, shows in a devastating way that futility.

And we really want to focus today on this issue. It's really an issue of formed gods versus the God who forms us. That's basically what you find there summarized in verse 21.

Remember these things, O Jacob. I formed you. You are my servant. So instead of these gods that you have formed, come back to me.

Consider what you're doing. Consider that I have formed you and you are my servant. Now that gives us not just a critique of idolatry, but it gives us immense comfort that as we put our trust in God, this is in fact what he confirms for us.

That we are his servant, but also we will not be forgotten by him. We are not going to be abandoned by him. Nothing is going to be too big for him to handle.

[3 : 52] Whatever it is comes into our lives. He is there to manage our lives all the way through it. And let's look at it first of all in terms of God forming and something of what the word form actually means in the Old Testament, especially though it's coming into the New too, of course.

The word form and what does it mean? What does it mean that God forms us or has formed us? And when you go back to verse 6 there, you find, Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts.

I am the first, I am the last. Besides me there is no God. Then you go to verse 24 as well. Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb.

And all the way through there you have got an emphasis on creator and redeemer together. But there is built into that this idea of God forming a people for himself.

And you get more of the idea of that from, first of all, if you begin with the creation. With the creation of the universe. How God formed the universe. And then you take what you see in that into the area of redemption, of salvation, the spiritual forming with which God forms a people for himself.

[5 : 16] So you get the meaning of the word essentially from what you see in the creation. The Old Testament has two words for the idea of creating and God creating something especially.

The first word is a word that's only used of God in the Old Testament. It's in the Hebrew word is bara and it means to create. And the emphasis in it is to bring something into being.

To bring something into being especially with regard to the universe. Something that did not exist until God called it into being and brought it into being.

He created it. God himself alone has that capability and ability to bring things that do not exist except in his mind.

He brings them into being. There was no universe. There was no creation. There was no earth. There was no planet. There were no planets. There were no galaxies. Until God spoke and said, let this be.

[6 : 18] Let it come into being. He created it. That's the emphasis in that word. But this word forum, it's the Hebrew word yatsar, which has to do not with bringing something into being out of nothing or that didn't exist.

It has to do with fashioning something. Bringing something into shape. It has to do with the idea of a craftsman.

And indeed, part of the ridiculing of idolatry in the previous verses is that Isaiah says, look at how carefully the craftsman goes about this metal work or this work of wood as he fashions this idol. And what does he then do? Well, actually, to begin with, it's just the leftovers of the wood because he's used the most of it and the best part of it. He's used it to make a fire, to actually prepare food and cook it on the fire.

And then of the remainder of the leftovers, he makes it into a god. That's really the human heart at work, isn't it? The best things for themselves. The best things for ourselves.

[7 : 25] And if we've got anything left over, well, we can make that into a god or we'll give that to God. But what he's saying is the care that that craftsman takes, fashioning this idol.

And he doesn't actually realize that he himself has been fashioned and formed by the great craftsman who is God. Now, all that means that, you know, you could go into that a lot more.

But what it means for our purpose now to understand something of the meaning of being formed by God. When you look at the creation, he brought it into being, but he also fashioned it. It's not just that the power of God is at work in creating all of this, the universe as it exists.

It's not just the power of God. There's also the design of God. There's a big debate, isn't there, about whether or not the universe has a design or has a designer behind it.

When you believe the Bible and you accept the Bible as it is and you accept its historicity and its truthfulness, then you know that there's a designer. The universe has a designer label on it.

[8 : 29] And that designer is God, the one who brought it into being, the one who formed it. It's power and purpose. It's a mind at work.

It's a mind bringing what was in that mind to be formed and fashioned, to correspond exactly to his mind and to his plan. You see, that means that in the way that God forms the universe, there is a purpose.

There is a deliberate design to it. He didn't just create it in any sort of way. He didn't let it just find its own place. He designed it specifically to be as it is.

And you find that with the creation and the forming of human beings as well. Because in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, you find these words used.

Genesis 1, 27 has the word created. So the Lord God created man, male and female. He created them.

[9 : 37] That's bringing them into being. And then Genesis 2 and verses 7 and 8 uses the word formed. So that you find God bringing a particular shape.

God actually having designed this human being. What does he do with him? He breathes into him and he becomes a living soul. There's the deliberate purpose, the forming of God.

Why are human beings the way they are? Is it because after millions of years, a process of evolution has reached the point that we're now at? Are we the end product or the ongoing development of something that began by itself or by chance?

In a very simple form of life and developed into the complex things that you and I are with our minds, with our capacity to think and to reason and to reach conclusions and to debate. No, God made us that way. God formed us. His design set us as we are as human beings. [10:48] God formed us. And you can see the forming of God in that. Now just in passing, it is interesting. When you go to Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, that also is a polemic.

It's an argument against idolatry. Because in Moses' day, they too were surrounded by people, not just in Egypt, but the surrounding nations around Israel, even after they left Egypt. But particularly in Egypt, they were living amongst the people who worshipped these heavenly objects, the moon, the sun, the stars, other objects as well that were created, creatures and beings and inventions of human beings.

And Moses, as God directed him to write out the account of creation, is basically saying to idolatrous pagan nations, the things that you are actually venerating were fashioned, they were formed by God the creator, including yourselves as human beings.

That's why he deliberately describes the creating of the sun and of the moon, the greater and lesser lights. And he made the stars also is really just a general reference that he makes in passing.

[12:05] Well, there is God forming. Forming the universe, giving shape to it. And bringing his design to bear on how it actually comes about and is.

And that takes you to God's forming of a people. You carry all that with you. And then you find there are additional elements in redemption where God forms a people for himself.

And there are two in particular in this passage that we can look at just briefly. There's first of all the emphasis on Redeemer. Thus says the Lord in verse 6, And his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts.

And then there is also verse 24. Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb. I am the Lord who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens.

Now you notice the combination of creator and Redeemer. He's saying, I'm not just your creator. I haven't just brought you into being literally and physically.

[13:08] I have formed you spiritually. I am your Redeemer. I have brought you redemption. And what is redemption? Well, redemption essentially is to buy something back, to bring something that's been lost back by way of a purchase price.

A whole lot of these terms are combined throughout the scriptures, as you know. And the New Testament builds on the Old Testament. God, through Jesus Christ on the cross, his death is the purchase price.

We're not to ask the question, who did God pay? In a sense, he paid himself. His own demands were met. But what's emphasized is the great cost of redeeming us, of bringing us back into his favor, of purchasing us again, back from our lostness, back from our sinfulness, back from our guilt. God paid our debts in the death of Christ. That's what it took. That's the ransom. And that's so much part of what Isaiah here says as well.

If you go back to the previous chapter, for example, there's a whole lot of this through Isaiah, but just because chapter 43 is the previous one, you can look at it there, verse at the very beginning.

[14:40] Now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel. Notice the two words there. He created you, and he formed you. Fear not, for I have redeemed you.

I have called you by name. And then there's the assurance that God will look after them because he's their redeemer. He will look after them through their troubles. And you can see as the chapter goes on, he says, For I am the Lord, your God, verse 3, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

I gave Egypt as your ransom. Cush and Saba in exchange for you. Now it takes you into the great Old Testament imagery of deliverance from Egypt as the great picture in the Old Testament of redemption.

There isn't a greater picture in the Old Testament or a great symbol or type of redemption than the Exodus from Egypt. There were Israel enslaved in Egypt.

God came down to rescue them. But in rescuing them, he inflicted the death penalty, if you like, on Egypt. He gave Egypt for the ransoming of his people.

[15:59] And that concept goes right through then into the New Testament where the death that was represented in the firstborn in Egypt and in the sacrifice of the Passover lamb in Egypt, the blood of which was the sign of security for the people, where all of that comes to its height and to its fulfillment in the lamb of God, in the death of Jesus, in the blood that was shed redemptively at Calvary.

And in doing so, God was forming a people for himself. He was bringing into being and giving particular shape to the people that would be his people.

All the way through, you've got that, and that's what anticipates Jesus as we say in Isaiah there.

And remember Jesus himself, Mark 10, verse 45, one of those famous statements of Jesus.

when he contrasted himself with earthly kings, saying to the disciples, the earthly kings are there to be served. They have servants doing things for them.

But I am among you as the one who serves, and even the Son of Man, even the Son of Man, which really lifts himself to hide above everyone else, even the Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many.

[17 : 29] He came to be a servant and to give his life a ransom for many. Jesus was conscious all the way through his life on earth.

And it was something in terms of his human development that grew with him as his understanding grew, that he was there as a servant and as a ransom, that the deliverance of his people needed his death as the ransom prize.

And then that carries through into other parts of the New Testament. 1 Peter 1 19, you were redeemed not with corruptible things like silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish, without spot.

Ephesians 1 7, in whom, speaking of this Jesus, this Christ that God had provided as a Savior, in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins.

God's forming of a people is a matter of redemption, and redemption is the purchase of a people by a ransom price, a ransom price of the cross.

[18 : 51] And incidentally that tells you quite clearly that we are redeemed by a substitutionary atonement. That's not bad theology. That's not something that should be got rid of in this day and age.

You get rid of that, you have no life. You have no way of being brought back to God. Death rules, no hope, all the lights have gone out.

The universe is in darkness. God forming a people by redemption. The other thing that's mentioned there in God forming a people that's important is the matter of pardon.

It's not just that Jesus has come, and has died on the cross and therefore that is the redemption price that God has provided. That goes towards our forgiveness.

I have, he says, blotted out your transgressions in verse 22 like a cloud and your sins like mist. Return to me for I have redeemed you.

[19 : 57] Now blotted out really means literally again what you would find on a parchment or whatever was used in those days for writing letters or words onto.

If you wanted to reuse it then you wiped it clean. What existed on it was wiped away and you could put something else in its place. And it's a wonderful illustration of what happens when God forgives our sins.

There's our record. There it is written up. Everything that God knows we are guilty of. Every single sin of your person and my person.

It's all written up there on the record. And God has that before him. And why did Jesus die? What is the purpose of God? What is the design of God in the death of his son?

It's so that this record would be wiped clean. So that God could say of you and of me, there's nothing now on the record. that was there before.

[21 : 03] It's been wiped away. I have blotted out your transgressions. That doesn't mean there's nothing on the record. Because God has actually written something else.

There's a new record. There's an emphasis on righteousness. Being acceptable with God. Being in favor with God. Being in friendship with God.

That's all written up instead of the original record where our sins and our guilt were written up against us. God has put the righteousness of Christ. That comes to be yours when he becomes yours.

When you take him as he's offered in the gospel. When you've put your trust in him. When you've given your life into his hands. Whatever ways we use to describe it, it means coming into a living connection with Jesus Christ.

And by faith in him, by that connection, you've got a new record. It's never going to be wiped clean again. It doesn't need to be. It's all about being acceptable and accepted and in God's favor in

Christ.

[22 : 19] I have blotted out your transgressions. love. And that's really the reason why because they've gone astray and God has already said this about them that he has already done this for them.

Now he's calling them back to himself. Return to me for I have redeemed you. Whenever God's forgiven people go astray, this is the kind of verse that God uses to jolt their memory, to jolt their minds into what they're doing and what they need to do in response to that.

What they're doing is being untrue to God and God is saying return to me for I have redeemed you. And again you find that back right at the very beginning of Isaiah where he sets out so graphically the terrible condition the people are in having gone away from God and bound up in their idolatry. And the consequences of that and the devastation spiritually and morally that is described there in the nation. And yet he says there to them at verse where he comes to verse 17 and 18 Come now let us reason together says the Lord.

Though your sins are like scarlet they shall be white as snow. Though they are red like crimson they shall become like wool. God you see is addressing them as a people who have known him as their redeemer as their creator as the one who formed them and that's the basis of his appeal to them to return to come back to him to have it out with him to come to reason together over their sins so that they'll be restored and cleansed and forgiven as we ourselves too must.

[24 : 23] So God forming the creation, the universe, God's forming of a people. But briefly let's consider thirdly the consequences of God forming a people.

Look again at verse 21. Remember these things O Jacob for you are my servant. I formed you, you are my servant. The two things that come across as consequences of God forming us are firstly ownership and then secondly security.

The ownership that you have there is emphasized they are God's property, they are his servant. That's why this idolatry thing is such a serious business. They're acting as if they no longer belong to God, as if he no longer has a right of ownership over them.

And that's how it is with me too and with you. When you go astray into the saving of other than God, when you come to backslide, to rebel against him, to do things that you know are not in keeping with God's ownership of you.

God actually highlights that for us. And that's where you find the kind of ridicule you've got in these previous verses. Here's the people, this is what they're doing with these trees and all of these other objects that they're fashioning into idols.

[25 : 46] And God is saying, just think of what you're doing. You can see there even the trees themselves are mentioned as things which God has actually created.

Even every tree, he says, I have created. And he's even calling upon the trees in verse 23.

Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it. Shout, O depths of the earth. Break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it. It's as if God is addressing the trees themselves and saying to them, look, don't allow yourselves to be chopped down and used in idolatry.

Instead, break forth into singing and praise your creator. Of course, trees don't do that, they're inanimate objects, but Isaiah, it's one of Isaiah's ways of showing up the ridiculousness.

the seriousness of idolatry, of abandoning God, of turning away from him, of not putting him first, of losing sight of his ownership of us.

[26 : 53] And there's security as well, verse 21, where you find again him saying, I formed you, you are my servant, O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.

well, that's really equivalent to saying, I will always positively remember you.

You'll never be out of my mind. My mind will always be set upon you. I will never forget you. As Isaiah actually puts it elsewhere, where he talks about in verse chapter 49, where he says that Zion is saying, the Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.

Can a woman forget her nursing child? Yes, even they may forget. Yet I will not forget you. I have engraved you on the palms of my hand.

Now that fits in with verse 21. O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me. You know, everything is actually within God's remembering of his people.

[28 : 03] Everything that we need, every ounce of comfort, every ounce of assurance, every ounce of strengthening, every ounce of hope, everything of that is packed into this one word, remember.

God remembers. We're never out of God's mind. I always think of that wonderful prayer of the thief on the cross.

I'm not sure if he knew exactly what he was saying, but I'm not sure that he knew the extent of what he was asking for. Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

What a great prayer. Everything's within that because if the Lord remembers us, then we're safe, we're secure, we're looked after. The designer is our manager.

God's remembering. The Lord remembers. That's why the psalmist so often puts it in the same sort of similar sort of terms like he does where he talks about how precious Lord are your thoughts to me.

[29 : 14] God's thoughts. That's God's remembering. God in heaven thinking about him positively. how precious the psalmist saying, your thoughts are to me.

No event, no development. Nothing that might be sudden or unexpected with us is so with God. They're all within his purpose. And all the way through them, God has this wonderful remembrance of his people.

And you can say, whatever happens, I really don't need to worry about things. I know that's not how we often act. But in principle, that's how it should be with us.

If we are the Lord's, if we're in Christ, if we're safe, if we've been redeemed, then we should be able to say, it doesn't really matter what happens, I don't need to worry about it, because God is looking after me.

God's remembering me. He never forgets. In other words, Isaiah really is showing up what's effectively a contest, although actually it's no contest at all, really.

[30 : 30] There's only one winner, and that's God. A contest between the idols who can never remember anything. Psalm 115 and other similar passages, they have eyes but see not, noses but smell not, they have a throat but it makes no noise, there's no brain in them, there's no mind, no desire, no purpose, their futility, lying vanities.

Contest between the idolatry that can never remember and the God who can never forget. There's no contest, is it?

And that's why verse 21 begins with the word remember as well. It's not just telling us God remembers his people. God is saying to his people, you remember this.

Remember these things O Jacob. That means today he's saying this to you and he's saying it to me. He's giving us this critique of idolatry.

He's showing us the futility of putting our hopes and our trust in anyone other than God. He's telling us how serious it is to leave God for anything else.

[31 : 52] And he's telling us you remember these things. Take it to heart. Make it your purpose to apply this in your life.

That's what he means. Remember these things. O Jacob. And each of us can put our own name instead of Jacob. Remember these things God is saying to us.

And it's for our good. Let's pray. Lord our God, we thank you that you remember us even when we do not remember you.

We give thanks that you are the God who constantly looks to your people. people. And we give thanks too that you give us the capacity of remembering. And there are so many things, O Lord, that you call upon us to remember, and particularly in relation to your own salvation and to the way in which you have constantly given promises to your people.

So bless us then, we pray, and bless your word to us once again. Be with us again this evening and throughout this day, and all for Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen.