

God's Role for the Church in His Plan for the World

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Preacher: Rev. James Maciver

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn to Isaiah 45, and looking at this passage in chapter 45 from verse 14 down to verse 23 in particular, just picking out the main threads of that passage without going into the detail of every verse.

We're going to call our study today God's role for His church in His plan for the world. It's God's role for His church in His plan for the world, or in His world plan.

Now you're very well aware, I'm sure, that the church, to use it in its widest sense, has had a pretty bad press of late.

And indeed the press, many parts of the press at least, are very keen to find fault with the church, and many people who despise the church and despise the gospel, jump onto these opportunities that they're given.

When something happens that brings the church's name and God's name into disrepute, many people are ready to jump onto that and say, yep, that's the church, and that shows you how bad religion is for you.

[1 : 14] Just avoid these things. It plays into the hand of atheism, of secularism, of humanism. And of course, we're ready to acknowledge, I hope, that where fault has duly been found with the church, then we have to hold up our hands and confess that we've done that.

No church is perfect. No congregation is perfect. But that is no excuse for people of the church who profess to serve Christ to be involved publicly in shameful acts.

But the problem is that that, as we say, then comes to be applied to the church as a whole. Every denomination is lumped together by and large by the world, by that sort of press, by those who are waiting for these opportunities, without really distinguishing between certain parts of the church and others, or distinguishing between a congregation or even a person who belongs to the church and the church itself.

That's always been the case. This is not something new. And we have to turn to the Bible to actually remind ourselves that the church of God embraces all denominations where the Christian gospel is proclaimed, where the sacraments are duly and properly administered.

The reformers saw these as the two great marks of the church, they called it. In other words, they were saying, if the gospel is faithfully preached, if the sacraments are faithfully, that's the sacraments of baptism and of the Lord's Supper, if they are faithfully administered.

[2 : 55] There you have the church. It doesn't mean that everybody found in any congregation of the church where these two great marks exist. It doesn't mean that everybody there truly is converted, truly is saved.

But you have the church there. That's why you find in the New Testament that Paul introduces as letters by, for example, the church in Corinth, which the whole of 1 Corinthians shows had massive problems.

And there were people in it that you would think, well, they shouldn't really belong to the church if that's the way they're behaving. Yet God, through Paul, addressed them as his church in Corinth. Because he had faithful people there, even though others were not following him as faithfully as they should. So we're using the church today in that sense in which God's people, God's confessing people or a people who confess God as their God, exist in the world like ourselves, are shown to be today as we gather together, God's church.

The people who confess that he is our God, that we gather to worship him, that we are his people, his followers, his adherents in the sense of adhering to God as our God and giving him the worship and the service that he deserves.

[4 : 22] There are, of course, many different kinds of denominations, but there is only one church, one people of God. And, of course, you know yourselves that the Bible itself speaks about churches that are dead or decaying.

The seven letters in Revelation, the first three chapters of the last book are letters to the seven churches which tell us many of the things that were wrong in some of these congregations, some of these churches.

And, of course, that still follows through. There are churches that don't have the gospel and yet may have the name of church. Well, if there isn't a gospel preached faithfully, then you can question, is that really a church at all?

Is it just a social club? Is it more than just that to it? However, the one thing I hope will come across to us today from this, or one of the main things at least is, how wonderful it is, what a great privilege it is to belong to the church of God in this world.

We're looking at the church as it is in this world. There is, of course, the church in the sense of the church glorified, the church when it's in its final glorified state, when everybody in that church, the glorified church, is certainly saved and reflects the honor and the image and the glory of Christ.

[5 : 49] But the church in the world, mixed as it is, is something that is still a privilege to belong to, because, as we'll see, that's where God himself is found.

That's where God particularly works through the gospel. That's where we receive spiritual help and nourishment and support and feeding. So what's the situation in this chapter with Isaiah?

Well, Isaiah here is dealing with what he calls in chapter 44, Lord's anointed Cyrus. Cyrus was the Persian king under whose leadership the Babylonian empire was crushed.

And as Cyrus came to power and defeated the Babylonians, it led to the release of the people of the Jews who had been brought by the Babylonians for 70 years captive in Babylon.

It was under Cyrus that they were allowed to go back to Jerusalem. And you know what that meant. The books of Nehemiah and Ezra tell us the rebuilding work that took place when they got back to Jerusalem in different groups at different times.

[6 : 59] That's the background to it. And as Isaiah is setting out this message, the people have not yet gone into that Babylonian exile, but it's a great threat.

It's a huge black cloud on the horizon. And God is saying, this is what will happen to you unless you repent. And we know that they didn't repent. So what God had said came to pass. And what Isaiah does is take us beyond those times themselves into the New Testament age, into the age where Christ is the king and where his people under him are blessed.

So this is a passage that deals with, as we'll see, the intake of the Gentiles. That's ourselves. In the days of the apostles, you know that the gospel went out from the Jews, which were a people to whom God had revealed himself down through the ages, only after Christ's death and resurrection, and after the preaching of the gospel in Christ to the Jews had taken place, and after they rejected it, did it go out into the countries, the nations of the world, the Gentiles.

And this is a prophecy in this chapter of the Gentiles coming in to be part of the church. In other words, it speaks about Israel here in verse 17, for example.

Israel is saved by the Lord. And you have to, in your mind, include yourselves in that, because Israel in that sense is the whole church. It means the Gentiles brought into the provision of the gospel, the salvation that is in Christ.

[8 : 39] Let's look at three things. God's presence in the church, and God's salvation of the church, and God's message through the church. Verse 14, first of all, God's presence in the church.

Now, you'll notice the mention of Egypt, and of Cush, and the Sabaeans, that's the district or nation of Seba. And they were all south of Egypt.

And what it's really saying to us is, these nations that are presently outside of Israel, Isaiah saying, they will all come over to you and be yours. In other words, he's saying, although presently you're captive to them politically, the days are coming when all of these people will come to God's people for salvation.

Because they will recognize that there is something with God's people that they need. That there is something in their midst that they can't do without. That is God, and that is God's salvation that's recognized as in their midst.

And when you bring that up to date, what it really means, basically, is that we should see ourselves as God's church in the world as the place where God is to be found, and the place that people will

seek to come to if God brings their need to light in their hearts.

[10:02] In other words, you notice it's saying here, they shall come to you in chains. They will plead with you saying, surely God is in you. They'll come over to you in chains and bow down to you.

In other words, what does that mean in terms for ourselves today? It means that people who once saw the church as an enemy, there are many people like that still today, of course, who saw the church as an enemy and the church's message as something really that they just did not want and didn't see as relevant to the world.

When God begins to work in your life and in their lives, that changes. Your view of the church changes. Your view of the gospel changes. Your view of what you really need changes.

And instead of regarding the church as an enemy, and regarding the message of the church and the message of the gospel through the church as distasteful and not for you, that's what you then come to desire.

That's what you come to realize. I just can't manage without this where I need to be found, because this is where God is, and this is where God's truth is. And you see, the reason that these people outside will come into the church is they will plead with you saying, they will plead with the church, with those who belong to the church already, they will plead with you saying, surely God is in you, and there is no other, no God besides him.

[11:35] These nations that worshipped all these gods, the gods of Egypt, of the Sabaeans, of the people of Cush, and every other nation and race in the world, here is a prophecy through Isaiah that's saying, they will come, there will be people from all of these backgrounds that will come, and will come to the church where the gospel is proclaimed, and will plead with the church saying, surely God is in you, this is where we now recognize God to be, and we're turning out back on the other gods that we made for ourselves and once followed.

They're coming into the church because of three things, or two things especially. Firstly, that that is where God is found.

Surely, God is in you. And secondly, that there is no other God but this God. There is no other, no God besides him.

And when you go to the New Testament, that's exactly what you find happening. For example, just to pick on one example, the Thessalonians, the church in Thessalonica, where Paul preached the gospel, where a church was formed by people coming to be joined together in the Lord.

At the end of the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians, this is what Paul is saying as he writes that letter to these people in Thessalonica. This, he says, is what happened. You received the word through us.

[13:09] And, as a result, you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven.

You see how that fits exactly with what Isaiah was prophesying all these hundreds of years before. Here were the people in Thessalonica, this dark town, this city that had so many people given to idolatry.

What did they do when the Lord began to work in their lives? They sought out the church. They came into the church. They became part of the church. They turned from idols to the living God with the conviction, this is where God is.

And this is God and no other. Now, two things practically follow from that for ourselves. One is encouragement. Another is a challenge.

The encouragement that we can take in times when we face decline, when we face so many alternatives to God, to the only true and living God, when we think that it's so difficult as it is to declare the gospel, to witness to Christ, to bring people or to have people come into the church.

[14:30] These are the days we live in. These are the conditions we face. How difficult was it in Thessalonica? Is it any more difficult today than it was then?

No. What made the difference? What made the difference? Is that God was at work and impressing upon people outside of the church that they needed him.

And that's our great encouragement. We meet for prayer regularly. We meet to pray to God and one of the things we bear before God in prayer is that he would not just work in our own lives and make us better people than we are, but that he would work in lives out there as we witness to him today.

Is our prayer not that as people see us coming to church that God would bring them to think of themselves, that God would actually get them to consider properly where they are in relation to him. And that they would come to this moment in their own experience when they would say, surely God is with these people and God is among these people. And I've come to know the need of my heart is my need of this God.

[15:43] God. You and I can't do that for them. But you can pray and I must pray that God will do that for them.

And it's also as an encouragement when we realize that that is what God is able to do. It's also a great challenge. A challenge to ourselves to show what the church means to us as well as what God means to us.

To show what it is we're doing when we call ourselves the church of God in the world and we say rightly that we belong to his church in the world. It's a challenge for us to, as we face a society where the word multi is so often used.

Multi-religious. Multi-ethnic. Multi-faith. All of these multis mark our society.

And when you put alongside of that the political correctness, the need we're told to make no distinction between religions in terms of importance. The need to let everybody worship their God as they must without interference trying to convert them from that to the God that you worship.

[17:04] Well, that's the challenge for us. How do we live for God? How do we present the gospel as we must? How do we fulfill the mandate that Jesus gave to his people that we read on Wednesday night prior to our introduction of the Christianity Explored course?

Go as my disciples into all the world and make disciples of every nation. Teaching them to observe whatever things I command you.

Baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And, lo, I am with you to the end of the age. there's the challenge but there's the encouragement as well what is our great encouragement our great encouragement is Christ's Lordship on the basis that he has been given all authority as he puts it there in heaven and on earth go and make disciples be encouraged to do so in my authority and my presence will be with you let's put it ourselves as this year unfolds that one we are to show ourselves to be a people that value the presence of God where God amongst us is appreciated and where we exist in this world to give praise and to glorify and to give honour to him and two let's pray for people who don't belong presently to the church at least in the sense of gathering with God's people to worship him let's pray that God will work in their lives there are people who've never been to church who've never known the gospel rather who are brought up in the church brought up in Christian homes but don't presently themselves belong to the church as it is seen visibly worshipping God we pray for them too they have the seed of the gospel in them they have the word of God lodged deep in their hearts they're maybe not aware of it much at the time at the present time but we pray that the day will come when they will come to realise surely God is in you therefore we come pleading with you seeking him and seeking the salvation that is in him so God's presence in the church is what attracts people who have come to know their need to come to join the church to come to be part of the church and to come to seek God because that's where he's found in the gospel secondly

God's salvation of the church now in verses 15 through to 16 there truly you are a God who hides himself O God of Israel the Saviour difficult words that probably means that God is indescribably beyond our ability to follow everything he does something similar to what we saw last time in Isaiah 55 my thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways they are above your ways God is incomprehensibly great he's in every sense hidden from us in that way in terms of his greatness as we mentioned being beyond our ability to get it all into our minds but however you interpret that verse the following verse 16 and 17 they go on to speak about the difference between those who are given to idolatry and Israel the people of God the church saved by the Lord all of them are put to shame and confounded the makers of idols go in confusion together now Isaiah is the master of polemic against idolatry if you want to find in your Bible passages that really are pointed and clear and challenging to idol remember idolatry is not just making little bits of wood and then falling down and saying you are my God idolatry is wherever anything or anyone takes the place of God in our devotions in our priorities in other words when you think of idolatry you don't just think of what happened in the days of Isaiah you look out into that world today and you look into your own heart and say this is a factory of idols as John Calvin called it this is where the idolatry is produced in my own heart because I have so much in my own heart as there is in your heart as

there is in the heart of every mere human being a desire for others beside God to lead their lives to direct their lives so the futility of idolatry is one of the things that Isaiah is such an expert at describing and his description here talks about the shame the contempt that the confusion that the makers of idolatry will go into if that's where they continue now to be put to shame is a lot more than what we think of as shame in the ordinary sense this is talking about eternal things this is talking about things which will always follow throughout eternity in the judgment of God in other words and being put to shame as far as

[22 : 53] God is concerned means being held by him in everlasting contempt and if we think that's small and insignificant we really don't know much about our Bibles if God holds us in everlasting contempt then that means that it's the worst that could possibly be imagined that's true of us but there's something else too that he says about idolatry if you go to chapter 46 which follows on of course from what he's saying here bell bows down navel stoops the idols their idols are on beasts and livestock these things you carry are born as burdens on weary beasts they stoop they bow down together they cannot save the burden but themselves go into captivity listen to me O house of Jacob all the remnant of the house of Israel who have been born or carried by me from before your birth carried from the womb even to your old age

I'm he and to grey hairs I will carry you I have made and I will bear I will carry and I will save now you've got a great contrast there and it's a graphic wonderful description if we follow other than God it doesn't matter what idol it is it doesn't matter how it's come to be formed but it's burdensome what he's saying is that idolatry presses you down idolatry gives you a burden that you just cannot lift yourself up under these gods Bel and Nabal are two particular gods of the Babylonians they were idols of the Babylonians what he's saying is the people who follow such gods and indeed whatever idols you follow instead of actually lifting you up instead of buoying you up instead of giving you strength they actually take away your strength they burden you they press you down they make you really stooped that's the sad and the solemn thing you see you tell people out there they can't really live meaningfully and properly without God without a proper living relationship with

God and yet it doesn't really get through to them just as it doesn't get through to ourselves till God shows us that our idolatry our service of ourselves and of others besides God or in the place of God or before God it crushes us it adds further burden you remember the words of Jesus and I think this was one of the things very much in the mind of Christ as he said this come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest your idols won't do it they burden you all you who are burdened and heavy laden Jesus says to these people who are trying to keep the laws of the Pharisees the minuteness of these human made laws and couldn't possibly keep them burdened under that legalism as a form itself of idolatry you might say

Jesus is saying come to me what's burdening your own heart today what is it that's crushing you down it needn't necessarily be idolatry it may be some problem it may be something that you know is a strong dark maybe feature in your life in your thoughts in your own experience in your family life in your relationships what do you do with it do you just let it burden you just look to your own strength to try and cope with it well it's just going to weigh you down more Isaiah saying but if you bring it to the Lord and you put it across on the Lord's shoulders then what happens well that's what he says isn't it in the following verses there he says but I am the one the one who has carried you before your birth and carried you from the womb even to your old age I am he and to grey hairs I will carry you I have made and I will continue to bear you up in other words in other words he's saying it's the very opposite as what it is with idolatry with everything that burdens you down God is saying I'm the opposite I carry you I hold you up I have created you so that I can look after you not to burden you not to crush you and you see the promise is even to grey hairs I will carry you it doesn't matter how old you are it doesn't matter even if your mind is gone if you can't remember things like you used to if you have dementia God hasn't left you if your trust is in him I will carry you as I promise to the end of our days that's why we seek God that's why we're concerned in being his people that others come to join us to seek him and to find him and to know him as well because this is the

[28 : 39] God that's found in his church the God that shows up the futility of serving anyone else in his place or before him and that's where he calls the safety of the Gentiles the safety of his church in their salvation but Israel is saved by the Lord with everlasting salvation you shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity salvation is from God I'm just summarizing this very briefly it's from God it's everlasting it is unchangeably secure because there's no shame in this the everlasting

shame belongs to those who are held in everlasting contempt who have not accepted God but he's extracted all of that from those who have come to him and have come to know him there's no such thing in their future in their experience in other words he's saying the salvation is from the Lord and that keeps you humble it's all about

God it's all from him and it's everlasting and that keeps you hoping that's what keeps your hope alive and vibrant that this salvation is everlasting that it goes on and there's no end to it the only way it will end is if the work of Christ came to an end and that never will be and it's secure unchangeably in order to make you happy your blessedness your everlasting happiness humble hopeful happy that's what God makes you based on God himself and thirdly God's message through the church just briefly again where you find especially in verses 22 and 23 turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth for I am God and there is no other now you notice how universal that call is it's a call from

God through his church this is the message of the gospel this is the message we live to proclaim not just from pulpits in preaching the gospel but from your life and from your witness and from you as belonging to the church what do you say to the world to the ends of the earth it says turn to me and be saved because I am God and there is no other there is no salvation in Islam there is no salvation in Buddhism there is no salvation in secularism or in humanism there is no salvation in any other form of teaching that does not have salvation in Christ and exclusively from this one true living God I don't care what people think about it and we mustn't actually give in to what people say in regard to the validity and the equality of other religions they are not neutral if you become a devotee of Buddha or of Allah you don't live a neutral life you live a life that is doing you positive harm because you don't have salvation in it you don't have Christ in his rightful place in it you have other than this God who says there is no other that is why the apostles in the early chapter of Acts in their preaching were so concerned to say this they were facing a world full of alternatives to Jesus full of people who said my God is just as good as your God and in fact a lot better I can see my God you can see you how do you know he even exists and how are you going to actually describe to people the worth of someone who died on a cross to save his people is that really meaningful and relevant that's what they were saying in the days of the apostle just as they are saying it today and the apostles insisted there is salvation in another and Jesus himself made it very clear I have the way the truth and the life and that's what makes it serious above all things not only that it's harmful to people but it's dishonoring to the only savior I am God and there is no other hence we live as a church in this world God is present amongst us we believe God is doing his work of salvation and has saved his people with everlasting salvation God has given us a message to proclaim on his behalf we say to the world look unto God all you ends of the earth and be saved for there is none other or as Paul put it I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation let's pray gracious and merciful God make us conscious of our privileges we pray at all times make us thankful for the privilege of belonging to your church of having the gospel to not only hear but also to be witness to in our lives we pray for those oh Lord who don't yet belong to your believing people who don't belong to your gathered church in the world we ask that you would work in their lives that they might come to recognize their need of you and come to where the gospel is proclaimed to your church that they might find you and come to a living relationship with you hear us now we pray for Christ's sake amen O them thank you