

God's Grand Vision: Transformed people

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Amy. Let's pray and ask God to illuminate his words in our hearts.

Father, these words belong to you, and we believe that you speak to us today by your spirit, and we pray, Father, that these words might cut us deep inside of us, so they might change us. We pray that through our hearing of your word, that Jesus' name would be honoured among us and among the nations, so that all glory might go to you, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Years ago, I was involved in a beach mission to a little place called Windang down the south coast. Yeah? You know Windang? Yeah, it's a pretty dirty little town, if I could say so. High youth unemployment. It's the first time that I've met Satan worshippers, and it was really interesting. I was involved with the mission to the adults. There was a, somebody was giving a talk, and I think it was a heroin addict and dealer and all that sort of stuff, and at the end of it all, one of the young blokes sort of stood up and said, you know, I'll believe you if your God comes down and he lights my cigarette. He was going to say something else, but he thought, you know, he didn't want to offend our Christian sensitivity. And there was a very interesting proposition to prove the truthfulness of the gospel. Of course, we were unable to do it, and he left. It might very well be a good question, and that is, how do we show our peers, people around us, God? Where is our God to be found?

That might be a question for non-Christians, but it might be a question for Christians as well, too. If you're going through a hard time, difficult patch in your life, you might be asking this question, well, where is God to be found? Do I need to storm heaven in order to see God?

We see today that there are two significant problems, two significant problems for the presence of God. The first one is the corruption of his people. That is how our passage begins.

God's people is just terrible. There's nothing to commend God's people, and we can see that the corruption of his people starts from its head, and we can see that in chapter 56, the last few verses.

[3 : 19] Verse 10, Come, all you beasts of the field, come and devour all you beasts of the forest. So it is an invitation to summon by God to the animals to consume his people. Why? Verse 10, Israel's watchmen are blind.

They all lack knowledge. They are like mute dogs. They can't bark. They lie around, dream, scratch their tummies. They love to sleep. They're dogs with mighty appetites. They never have enough. They're shepherds who lack understanding, or they all turn to their own way. Each seeks his own gain. Come, each one cries. Let me get wine. Let us drink our fill of beer, and tomorrow we'll be like today, or even better.

A terrible picture of what Israel is like. The head is corrupt. Verse 10, the watchmen of Israel.

I mean, who were the watchmen presumably in that time? You've got fortress, fortified cities, and people were assigned to care for the city by warning the city of its danger. The watchmen, you know, they stand at the turrets and watch for impending danger. It's a great, one of the, I imagine, prerequisite of being a watchmen is that you have good eyesight. I couldn't be a good watchman because I've got terrible eyesight. But these watchmen, the watchmen of Israel, they were blind.

They couldn't see. How could they possibly save Israel from danger? They were ignorant and they were lazy.

[5 : 04] And unlike me, who's got a genetic thing with my eyesight, these people were willfully blind. They were deliberately ignorant. And we can see the source of their ignorance and blindness in verses 11 and 12.

They were ignorant and they were blind because they love so much. They were lovers. They love their work.

They love their families. They love themselves. They comfort their ambitions, their hobbies. They love their drink. They love everything except for the people they were supposed to love and protect.

And as a result, the people of God is devout. It is a sick head, but the body is equally sick.

Have a look at chapter 57. The righteous perish and no one ponders it in his heart. Devout men are taken away and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil.

[6 : 16] Those who walk uprightly, however, enter into peace. They find rest as they lie in death. You know, the whole place is so bad that even when the little good disappears, no one notices.

This is how bad things were. And the accusation becomes more direct. But you, not just the head, but the body, you, everyone, come here, you sons of a sorceress, you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes.

Whom are you mocking? At whom do you sneer and stick out your tongue? Are you not a brood of rebels, offspring of liars? You burn with lust among the oaks and under every spreading tree.

You sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags. The idol among the smooth stones of the ravines, they are your portion. They are your lot. Yes, to them you have poured out drink offerings and offered grain offerings.

In the light of these things, should I relent? Et cetera, et cetera. This is what the people of God is like. They are children of sorceress and prostitutes and adulterers.

[7 : 28] It's not so much an indictment on their parents. It's really talking about what they are like. So if you are a son of rebellion, it's not saying that rebellion gives birth to you, but you have the characteristic.

You have the family trait of rebellion. So in other words, you are a rebel. If you are... So these people, they are children of unfaithfulness. They are characterized by their unworthiness, their unfaithfulness.

They are spiritually promiscuous. They are sons of liars. They are people who are deceitful. They lie. They mock. They stick their tang out.

At God, presumably. At the righteous. Mind you, it is not that they are irreligious. Have a look at verses 5 to 8 again.

This is a people full of religion. But they sacrifice to idols. Religion is everywhere, from on top of the mountain to the ravines.

[8 : 38] They sacrifice everything, even their children. In verses 9 and 10, we are told that they went down to Molech, and they send their ambassadors to afar.

They were so eager to seek out their spiritual lovers that they will go far and wide. Later on, God accused them to acknowledge the futility and the hopelessness of their idolatry, something that they refused to see.

They just don't see that as a complete waste of time and effort. And they keep going back to their idols, hoping to get something from them. Of course, just as an interlude, we might observe that this is not just what the people of God did thousands of years ago.

It's something that we are engaged in in our own time. In our city, Christians, and maybe even our church, that we prostitute ourselves to our idols.

I don't know whether I mentioned this before. It is interesting the way Isaiah describes their idols. Have a look at verse 11.

[9 : 58] Whom have you so dreaded and feared that you have been false to me, and have neither remembered me, nor pondered this in your hearts? Is it not because I have long been silent that you do not fear me?

The motivation for their idolatry was, in fact, fear. Whom have you so dreaded and feared? I can't remember when I said this in this congregation.

The way that you can tell what you worship is by what you fear. Whatever you have nightmares about, that is the thing that you worship.

That is your God. If you're afraid of being alone, if you're afraid of losing your financial security, if whatever it is that you're afraid of, that is your God.

And we prostitute ourselves to our gods. We sell our souls for all sorts of things. For pleasure. For a relationship. For approval.

[11 : 03] For a pat on the back by our boss. For applause from our peers. We even place our children on the altar, as it were, and sacrifice them to the God of success.

I come from a culture where people would send the, you know, there was someone in my church, previous church, who offered to coach my four-year-old, Maths.

And I thought about taking her on her offer. We put our children on the altar of success. Not just academic, but sporting, or their self-esteem, their popularity.

And we might ask the question, when we sacrifice to our idols, when we lay ourselves and our future and our children on those altars, we better make sure that it's worth it.

You know, when you make that decision to go out with that non-Christian boy or girl, you better make sure that you're selling your soul for something that is worthwhile.

[12 : 16] He better be worth it for your soul. That's an enormous problem, isn't it? That the people of God could be so corrupt from the top to the bottom.

But there is a bigger problem. There is a bigger problem. And it's a little bit subtle. It's a little bit hard to notice. And I might need to point it out for you to...

The bigger problem here is the context. It's the context. Why is that a problem? It's hard.

I know it's hard when we go through from week to week. Isaiah, it sort of all gets a bit lost. We don't know when... Just to refresh your memory, Isaiah, the book itself, is divided, or could be divided into two parts.

The first part is really looking at the impending judgment of God for the idolatry of Israel. That's the first part, first 39 chapters. God warns his people, if you don't quit your idolatry and prostituting and all this stuff, I'm going to come and smash you.

[13 : 21] And I'm going to give you a warning. This is what's going to happen to the Northern Kingdom. The Assyrians are going to come, and they're going to smash the North. And that's what happened. But I'm going to spare you, the South Jerusalem, from this, but you need to turn.

They didn't. And God says, what I'm going to do is I'm going to send something worse than the Assyrians, the Babylonians. They're going to come, and they're going to destroy everything that represents me.

They're going to come and destroy the temple, the symbolic presence, my presence, and they're going to take you away from the land, the symbol of my blessing and protection to you.

Everything that reminds you of me is going to be taken away from you. A little bit like Eden, you remember. Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve cast out from the garden.

They're not allowed to return because there's an angel with a flaming sword. Everything, the people of God will be cast out once again, exiled from the presence of God.

[14 : 24] That's the first 39 chapters, but that's not the end of the book. There's the second part of Isaiah. There will be a return, a return from exile.

There will be salvation. The people would come back to the land, the temple would be rebuilt on Zion, and the nations would come stream to Zion.

This is the second part of the book. Where is chapter 57 in? The second part of the book. It sounds a lot like the first part of the book.

Doesn't it? Here's the people of God being accused of exactly the same thing before the Babylonian exile. They're going back to their old ways.

It reminds me a little bit of what happened to Noah. You remember. You know, God was sick of the wickedness and the evil of our race, the human race, and he said, I'm going to wipe out everyone, but I'm going to save Noah.

[15 : 37] I'm going to save Noah and create a new people out of him. So everything on the face of the earth was wiped out, except for Noah and his family, the righteous man.

And God says, I'm going to make a promise to you. I'm not going to destroy the earth by flood water ever again. Even though, this is Genesis chapter 8, 21.

Do you remember what he says? Even though every inclination of his heart is evil from youth. Everything, every inclination, everything that you desire, your proclivities, everything, is evil from when you were a child.

The judgment of God, it seems, did not solve the problem. The earth was almost destroyed, but what did not change was the human heart.

And there it is. Again, here, the exile of God's people to a foreign land, everything that represents God is taken away from them.

[16 : 52] They brought back into the land. Did that change their heart? Clearly not. From the head to the toe, still sick.

Something has to be done. Something much more dramatic than an exile and a return. Which takes us to chapter 57, verse 14.

The highlight, in my view, of our passage. The Lord says, and it will be said on a day in the future, build up, build up, prepare the road, remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.

There will be a great returning. returning. Instead of turning away from God, people, his people will now turn to God. But there is a greater reversal in 15.

And this was, this verse just blew me away during the course of this week when I read it. So come and have a look at it. It says, for, for, because, this is what the high and lofty one says, he who lives in eternity, whose name is holy, I live in a high and holy place, but, also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.

[18 : 24] I live with him to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. This is the other great reversal. Did you notice how God is described?

High and lofty, dwelling in eternity. When I was teaching scripture, I get this question a lot, and I think I got this question from one of my daughters.

The question is, who created God? Have you ever got that one? Who created God? Do you know why they ask this question? Because it is impossible for us who do not dwell in eternity to imagine one who has no beginning and no ending.

Therefore, God must have been created like we are. God who dwells in eternity, who has no beginning, so no one created him, and who has no ending, so that no one will judge him.

He is the holy one. The holy one. You know, in the Old Testament, there's the temple divided into all these sections, and, you know, there are all these rituals associated with the temple.

[19 : 42] There's blood everywhere, splatters, you know, and every time somebody comes near the temple, something has to die. You know, imagine that sort of church. and right in front of this temple, you know, if we were to put a sign there, you know what the sign would say?

Stay away. That's what the temple, the sign in front of the temple would say. Keep out, stay away, you are not welcomed.

That is the temple of God. That's what it means to be holy. Did you realize that? No. Every word that you could possibly come up with to describe the difference between you and God is he, in verse 15.

The lofty one, the one who dwells on high in eternity. He is so different, so separate from us. You know, just to reinforce the point, do you remember Isaiah, what he says back in chapter 6 when he saw the one on the throne.

Chapter 6, you remember we looked at this during the course of our series. In the year that King Uzziah died, as I wrote, I saw the Lord seated on the throne, high and exalted, similar to the language, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

[21 : 12] Above him were seraph, which literally means the burning ones. each with six wings, with two wings that cover the faces, two that cover the feet, and two, with two, they were flying.

The created ones who have not fallen, these are un sinful ones, they couldn't even look at the presence of God, they had to cover the faces, and they were calling out to one another, holy, holy, holy, it's the Lord Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory.

The sound of the voices, the doorposts, and the threshold shook, and the temple was filled with smoke, and Isaiah says, I'm a dead person. Woe to me, I'm ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among the people of unclean lips.

My eyes have seen the King, the God Almighty. He is dead because he is unholy, unlike the Lord. This is the same God, and yet, in verse 15, did you notice the great reversal?

But, he who dwells in eternity, he will also dwell with the contrite.

[22 : 29] Did you notice that? You see, the sign didn't change. The sign to the temple didn't say, welcome. That's not the change.

Because what does it say? Verse 15. Who's dwelling with whom? Sorry, this isn't rhetorical, this is actually inviting you to participate.

Who's dwelling with whom in verse 15? Yeah. I can't see who said it, but yes, that's exactly right.

The unimaginable is not that sinful men and women and boys and girls are invited into the temple. That is not what's happening. Rather, the holy God is coming out from his temple to dwell amongst his people.

See, we take this so for granted. It is such a new idea. God is coming to dwell among his people. He will step out from heaven to do that.

[23 : 50] And as a result, there is life. Verses 16 to 19. I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry.

For then the spirit of man will grow faint before me, the breath of man that I have created. I was enraged by his sinful greed. I punished him and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways.

I have seen his ways, but I will heal him. I will guide him and restore comfort to him, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel.

Peace, peace to those far and near, says the Lord, and I will heal him. This is what God will do. He was angry, but his anger will be turned.

There is healing and comfort and peace. Everything will be reconciled and restored. Things will be as they should be. The disease that has caused the people of God to keep sinning, the thing that has led them to their idolatry again and again and the judgment of God will finally be healed.

[25 : 07] Because what is their problem? Ultimately is not just the external, ultimately is their hearts.

the problem with the world is here. And the Lord promised he needed, how could a holy God dwell among sinful people, even when they're forgiven?

They need to be changed in such a way that they will not sin anymore. cleanse. And the only way that that happens is if their heart itself gets ripped out and a new heart gets given.

And this is what Jeremiah says, Jeremiah 31, 31 to 33, behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. I will put my law in them.

I will write it on their hearts and I will be their God and they will be my people. One day I will give them the ability to obey my laws.

[26 : 20] Ezekiel says, a new heart I will give you, a new spirit I will put within you. I will take out of your flesh a heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you. The way he's going to do it is he's going to put his spirit in them.

His spirit will change their heart. They're all saying the same thing as I Jeremiah Ezekiel. They see the time that is coming when the sick, disobedient, high-hearted people will be supernaturally changed.

Their hearts will be changed and God will give them the ability to live new lives. This is when the lofty one, the one who dwells in eternity can now dwell with them.

Not just saving his people from exile, but transforming them so that they can return to him so that the holy one can dwell among sinful, corrupt people.

Three conclusions, really hard, quickly, because I just noticed I got a call from Jan, and that is making me very nervous. Firstly, first conclusion is where is God to be found?

[27 : 35] Where is God to be found? Is it the case? Could I have shown the young man where God could be found? Well, yes. He who dwells in lofty places, in some respect, this young man could never have ascended to heaven to meet God.

And yet, this is a God who could be found, who could be approached. Instead of a place, like a temple, like a church, he's to be found in Jesus. I wonder whether sometimes you feel the pressure yourself to experience the presence of God, to demonstrate his power to other people.

Well, I think the word to us is show where God is in Jesus, not in things that are necessarily clever and impressive.

Where is God to be found? He is to be found in Jesus. Secondly, what sort of people do you think will dwell with God or God dwell with them? You notice here it's not the strong people, not the worthy people, not the religious people.

They were religious. They were very religious. I just want to take you very quickly to Isaiah chapter 1 from verse 10.

[28 : 50] This is the accusation that the Lord has directed to his people, the religious people. Chapter 1 verse 10, the same sort of accusation. Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom. Listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah.

The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me? Says the Lord. I have more than enough burnt offerings of rams and the fed of fatted animals. I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.

When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my cords? Stop bringing meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable and your pointed feasts my soul hates.

They become a burden to me. I'm weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you. Even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood.

This is an indictment on Israel in her religion. Imagine if God were saying this, your singing every Sunday makes me sick. Makes me sick.

[29 : 54] Who me a favor by putting money on the offer tree back? Your money makes me ill. I can't bear to touch it.

I wish you would stop doing it. I can't stand your wicked Bible studies. I hate your singing, your services, especially your Christmas and Easter service.

In fact, frankly, they are a burden to me, and I'm sick of carrying it. I've had enough of your prayers for so long that I have stopped listening to you. Imagine that.

Could you imagine if this was said of a church, not ours, of course, the Presbyterians? You know, I wonder whether that's what we think is our problem with God.

If we do more ministry, or maybe it's somebody else's fault that we don't experience God. You see, what does the Lord require of his people?

[30 : 57] Is his sacrifices? Psalm 51, 17. It's not your sacrifice that I desire.

The sacrifice of the Lord is a broken and contrite heart. The two men who went to the temple, there's a Pharisee and there's a tax collector. Who left the temple justified.

The one who threw himself at the mercy of God. This is what the Lord desired, not your religion. He desires you to be broken, to recognize that you are a sinner, so that you might throw yourself down at his feet for his mercy.

And it is there that you will find mercy. Lastly, being mission month, we come back to mission. Of course, it was quite disappointing nobody says, oh, you know, we really motivated for global missions since looking at Isaiah.

Sad, really. But if you notice chapter 57, how does it end? end? How does it end?

[32 : 05] It ends with a warning. But notice in verse 19, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel, peace, peace to those far and near, says the Lord, and I will heal them.

Far and near. The message for those who can experience the presence of God. Far and near. Not just near, far.

It sort of makes me think, wow, you know, God sees beyond the generation in his time. That his purpose is to save the nations beyond the wars of Israel.

And it is being fulfilled. Us sitting here in Sydney, more than 2,700 years later, have been saved by him. Did you know that global mission is part of God's plans and purpose for the world?

God's love and it will not fail. It will not fail even if you don't give one single cent to it and if you're not part of it.

[33 : 12] You're not doing him a favor if you don't pledge. In fact, what God does is he includes us in his wonderful plans so that we can be blessed, so that the presence of the Lord will be all over the world, not just amongst us.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to see God's presence in the Middle East? That people come to experience the forgiveness and the presence of the one who's created them and he forgives them?

Do you think he could do it? Do you want to be blessed, to be included as part of that work so that in 10,000 years' time when we stand shoulder to shoulder with our Arab brothers and sisters we can be giving praise to our Lord Jesus Christ?

That's what Mission Month is about. That's what the 29th is about. It's saying that we believe that this is God's plan for the world and it will not fail and we would love to be part of this.

Would you like to be part of it?